

## Metaphysical Order

### Being and Presence

A form giver, al-Ghazali tells us, is one who has conceived of surat al-wujud in its entirety. He would have comprehended well the form and order of the universe so that its image becomes vividly present in his soul as though he is constantly observing it. Once this is achieved one descends down to the details.<sup>1</sup> Surat al-wujud, the “image of being,” externalizes al-Ghazali’s nuskhat al-alam, the “blueprint of the world” referred to earlier, materializing it in a visible form. Considering the instantaneous nature of the creative act, nuskhat al-alam and surat al-wujud should be understood as separated only by a conceptual distance. Here we will begin to explore surat al-wujud in both its holistic form and underlying order, focusing on God, Man, and the Word, that is, the creator, the idea, and the creative tool.

### Presence and Absence

When dealing with the Sufi conceptions of reality, physical or metaphysical, it is important to recognize the essential difference between their approach and the Cartesian view that conditions our modern understanding.<sup>2</sup> Sufis do not see the world through the Cartesian polarity of subject and object, mind and extension, conscious soul and extended bodies. In fact the subject-object polarity finds neither linguistic nor conceptual support in Arabic. Instead, Sufis present an understanding of the world through the polarity of presence (hudur) and absence (ghiyab). Every existent has a presence that matches its mode of being.

Even nonexistence has a notional presence. The Quranic polarity of the seen (shahada) and the unseen (ghayb) is but an expression of presence and absence.

The notion of presence refers to the complex web of physical, mental, and spiritual relationships a being spawns by its very existence and the influences it exerts

through this web of connectedness. A thing is perceived to have a presence insofar as it impacts other presences, influences their course of existence, and becomes part of their world. In other words, it is not the mere existence of the thing that matters but rather its level of impact and domain of influence. This is what makes it effectively present. Absence is the lack of such efficacy despite physical existence. From the human perspective, what matters is not what exists out there but what has a presence in, and an impact on, one's world.<sup>3</sup> In formal correspondences, it is still a common practice in the Arab world today to address the presence of the addressee. In the following, I will be introducing four presences: the primordial, divine, and human presences and the presence of the word. In this context, a "presence" (hadra) refers to a modality of being with all the realities it entails, the relations it involves, and the influences it commands.

#### The Presence of Geometry

In Sufi metaphysics, numbers and geometry are indispensable tools that aid the reflection on the nature of divinity and illustrate the order of being. Within the bounds of the Euclidean tradition, geometrical principles, such as the point, the line, and the circle, were consistently used to reason about metaphysical realities. As early as al-Hallaj (d. 922) we can trace the agency of geometry as a sophisticated hermeneutical tool. Geometrical principles, as will be shown here, are employed to illustrate the initial stages in the creative process, which coincide with the states of universal manifestation. These are the states through which God becomes manifest in various modalities, corresponding to the various levels of differentiation in his creative act. Familiarity with the basic principles of premodern Islamic geometry is therefore necessary, not only to appreciate the agency of geometry in metaphysical sciences but also to gain insights into the spatial reasoning in premodern Islam.

Following the Greek model, premodern Muslim scientists considered geometry to be a part of the mathematical science, which comprises four divisions: the science of number, whose principle is unity or the number one; the science of geometry, whose principle is the point; the science of astronomy, whose principle is the movement of the sun; and the science of music, whose principle is proportion or the equality of two ratios.<sup>4</sup> Along with this structure, geometry contained profound mystical dimensions that survived from the times of its Greek masters, such as Pythagoras, Nicomachus, Euclid, and Plato. The philosophical distinction between the sensible and the intelligible that underpinned the hierarchy of the world was extended to geometry. In their *Rasa'il*, the Ikhwan defined geometry as the science that deals with “measures” (*maqadir*) and “dimensions” (*abad*), in their quantitative and qualitative aspects. Distinguishing two kinds of geometry, they wrote: “Know, Oh brother . . . that the study of sensible geometry (*al-handasa al-hissiyya*) leads to proficiency in all the practical arts, while the study of intelligible geometry (*al-handasa al-aqliyya*) leads to proficiency in the intellectual arts, because this science is one of the gates that leads to knowing the substance of the soul, which is the root of all sciences, the element of wisdom, and the origin of all intellectual and practical arts.”<sup>5</sup> Sensible geometry was described as the science that deals with sensible measures and configurations, those that can be sensed by sight and touch, whereas intelligible geometry was seen as the science that deals with abstract, immaterial concepts, those that can only be known and understood by the intellect.

<sup>6</sup> By virtue of its intellectual nature, intelligible geometry was considered to be the foundation of designing. “When, in his craft, an artisan designs (*qaddara*) before commencing work,” the Ikhwan write, “this act involves a kind of intelligible geometry.”<sup>7</sup> This shows the utility of geometry as a design tool. Designing, the Ikhwan explain, involves dealing with measures, which are of three

kinds: lines, planes, and bodies. These three sensible measures can be conceived of mentally by the qualities of length, breadth, and depth. Length is the intelligible quality of the one-dimensional line; length and breadth are the intelligible qualities of the two-dimensional plane; and length, breadth, and depth are the intelligible qualities of the three-dimensional body. All measures in space can be known by means of these three intelligible qualities. “It is a part of the art of the erudite thinkers (al-muhaqqiqin),” the Ikhwan say, “to contemplate these dimensions divested of bodies.”<sup>8</sup> Geometry was also conceived as being based on the imaginary movement of the point, its generative principle. I will return to this later on. The point was seen as a geometrical reflection of the number 1, with both sharing the same ontological condition. The point was viewed as the principle of dimension, while itself having no dimension, just as the number 1 was seen as the principle of numbers, while itself not being a number. As generative principles both were seen to transcend the domain they manifest, disclosing a mode of reasoning that plays a central role in metaphysical reflections.

#### Unity of Being

In religious thought, the relationship between the creator and the creatures, God and the world, has always been a central theme. The perplexing questions of why and how God created the world, and what was he doing before creation, have engaged the religious imagination throughout history. The debate on these issues often leads to a sharp distinction between two modalities of being; one belongs to God, the other to the world. In Islam, this debate has continued to unfold a diversity of positions, ranging between the most hermeneutical and the most literal. In this debate the Sufis advocate the doctrine of the Unity of Being (wahdat al-wujud). Often misunderstood as blurring the boundary between God and the world, this doctrine emphasizes that there is only one modality of

Being (wujud) and that Being proper is none other than God in his most transcendental state. Everything else depends in their existence on this Being who is externalized in many colorful manifestations. As al-Nabulusi reflects: “Being is me, while a being is other than me, because beings are by me and I am by my Self.”<sup>9</sup>

The philosophical reasoning behind this complex concept is rather simple. If God in his primordial presence, before the creation of the world, absurd as this premise may be, is necessarily conceived of as mawjud (is), then al-wujud (being) must either be identical with or other than himself. Otherness implies duality that contradicts the Islamic doctrine of unity, therefore, alwujud and God must be one.<sup>10</sup> This is only the starting point though, and more complex reasoning is involved when the creation is taken into account. Some important linguistic issues must be considered when dealing with wahdat alwujud in English. To begin with, the polarity of “being” and “existence” or “Being” and “being” has no linguistic support in Arabic.<sup>11</sup> There is only one term wujud, with no lower and upper case, that accounts for all shades of meanings and conceptual nuances. The etymological root of this term is wajada, “to find,” whose passive form, “to be found,” means “to exist,” and the derivatives awjada and ijad mean “to bring into existence” and “bringing into existence” respectively.<sup>12</sup> In the Latin-based languages, where the linguistic and conceptual distinction between Being and being, on the one hand, and Being and existence, on the other, has both historical and philosophical depths, the concept of wahdat al-wujud appears confusing and loses much of its immediacy and transparency. This is reflected in the range of translations available: “unity/unicity/oneness of being/Being” and “unity/oneness of existence/Existence,” with all being unsatisfactory equivalents for tending to emphasize

either the divine or the worldly side of things, whereas the Sufi concept is clearly about the oneness of both. For simplicity and want of a better expression, I have used the term Unity of Being.

In al-Tuhfa al-Mursala, “a brief tract on illustrating the science of truths” that entertained wide popularity, Fadl Allah al-Barhanburi al-Hindi (d. 1620) explains wahdat al-wujud succinctly:

Know, O brothers, may God bring you and us happiness, that God (al-haqq), praised and exalted, is Being (al-wujud); and that this Being has neither shape nor limit nor confinement. Yet, in spite of that it has manifested and appeared in shape and limit but without changing from what it was, having no shape and limit: it is [now] even as it was. And [know] that Being is one, while the “clothings” (albas) are many and different; that this Being is the reality and inner essence of all beings (mawjudat); that all beings (kainat), even the atom, are not devoid of it; and that this Being is not understood in the infinitive sense of realization or happening (suggesting a duality of a subject and a state), for there are no two kinds of Being in the external world. Yet Being cannot be applied to external beings in the same sense as it applies to God, transcendent be he above that. Rather, by Being we mean the Real who is qualified by these qualities, I mean, its self-existence, the existence of everything else by it, and the absence of any other externally. And know that in respect of its inner reality (kunn) this Being cannot be revealed to anyone, nor can the intellect, the imagination or the senses conceive of it, nor can it be grasped by analogy. For all these are novelties, transcendent be his essence and attributes above that. And whoever wants to know God in this respect and goes after it is wasting his time.<sup>13</sup>

Thus understood, wahdat al-wujud sees God as the inner reality of all beings.

The oneness of the inner reality in relation to the many and different manifestations

is often explained analogically by reference to natural phenomena, such as the invisible, colorless light and its visible, colorful refractions. The concept is usually traced in numerous Quranic verses, such as, “wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115); “We are nearer to him than his jugular vein” (50:16); “And in yourselves. Can you not see?” (51:21); “We are nearer unto him than you are, but you cannot see” (56:85); and “He is with you wheresoever you may be” (57:4).

The Unity of Being becomes a contentious concept once the created world is entered into the equation. Conditions of worldly existence—space, time, and change—cannot be said to apply to the divine, hence the need to distinguish two modes of being, one of Being, the other of becoming, as in the Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics. According to *wahdat al-wujud*, however, there is no need for such a distinction, for the differentiation occurs in the states or modalities that Being takes on at different levels of manifestation. Such differentiation, however, remains external, as the one and same Reality always resides at the very core of things. Viewing *wahdat al-wujud* from the point of view of the distinction between Being and becoming, an unnecessary discontinuity between the divine and human modes of existence confuses the concept. While Being may still be seen as the inner reality of all existents, God remains distinct from everything else in the realm of existence. This is often the cause of misunderstanding.<sup>14</sup>

*Wahdat al-wujud* is commonly attributed to Ibn Arabi, who articulated it as a central theme in his writings and teachings. Its historical origin, however, cannot be so clearly defined, for there are many Sufi texts from the earliest period of al-Basri, al-Kharraz, and al-Hallaj that clearly express similar conception, though not at the same level of sophistication. Afi f i, in his introduction

to Ibn Arabi's most famous text *Fusus al-Hikam*, stresses that the radical doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* is entirely the fabrication of Ibn Arabi's imagination and that earlier Sufis had nothing to do with it. In the best light, Afi f i's remark reveals the stance of contemporary Islamic orthodoxy that is eager to show Ibn Arabi as an anomaly in an otherwise well-respected, orthodox Sufi tradition. Such a view fails to see the historical depth of the concept, to understand the true nature of the doctrine, and to discern the intrinsic link between the concept itself and the nature of the mystical experience.

Sufi literature presents ample references to *wahdat al-wujud*. The ninth-century Sufi al-Kharraz is often reported as quoting the Prophet's companion Ubayda (d. 639), saying: "I have never looked at a single thing without God being nearer to me than it."<sup>15</sup> In *Mishkat al-Anwar* al-Ghazali wrote: "The Truth of all truths: from here the Gnostics rise, from the lowlands of metaphor to the peak of the truth; and at the fulfillment of their ascent they see directly face to face that there is naught in existence save only God." He adds, "Each thing has two faces, a face of its own, and a face of its Lord; in respect of its own face it is nothingness, and in respect of the Face of God it is Being. Thus there is nothing in existence save only God and his Face."<sup>16</sup>

This is similar to what Abd al-Karim Al-Jili wrote three centuries later:

"Being has two aspects: one is pure Being, which is the Essence of the creator, the other is [relative] being associated with nothingness, which is the essence of the creatures."<sup>17</sup> This conception resonates with Ibn Arabi's teachings: "In relation to the forms of the world, 'everything will perish,' but in relation to its realities, the world will not perish, nor is it possible to perish."

<sup>18</sup> There is no doubt that since Ibn Arabi *wahdat al-wujud* has become a foundational concept in Sufi metaphysics. As a reflection of an intense

spiritual love of God and a burning desire to know him, the doctrine of the Unity of Being can also be seen as an outward expression of the mystical experience. If the affirmation of the absolute unity of God is the cornerstone of the Islamic religion, then the concept of wahdat al-wujud can be said to be its mystical expression.

### The States of Being

While Being in its highest state is identical with the unknowable Essence, this does not mean that it is totally inaccessible by the human mind. Al-Hindi explains that Being has other states whereby it can be known. These states represent degrees of qualification or definition, referred to as “essential determination” (al-taayyun al-dhati), meaning the knowable conditions whereby the divine Essence becomes determined.

These states also correspond to the modalities of “universal manifestation” (al-zuhur al-kulli), meaning the knowable conditions whereby the world becomes determined. The hierarchy of these states can be considered from a number of standpoints; however, they are often categorized into seven levels. In al-Tuhfa al-Mursala al-Hindi defines the seven states of Being as follows:<sup>19</sup>

1. Transcendent Unity (al-ahadiyya): the state of “nondetermination” (al-lataayyun), “absoluteness” (al-itlaq) and “pure Essence” (al-dhat al-baht), not meaning “that the limits of absoluteness and negation are affirmative in this state, but that al-wujud in this state transcends the addition of qualities and attributes, and is too sacred to be defined by any limit, even the limit of absoluteness.” It is the state of the ineffable Essence that “refuses human understanding”; the state of “nonqualified”

and “nondetermined” existence that lies beyond human conception.

As such, it cannot be the object of any distinctive knowledge,

and is, therefore, inaccessible to the human mind.

2. Divine Solitude (al-wahda): the state of “first determination” (alta ayyun al-awwal) that represents God’s knowledge of his

Essence, attributes, and all existents (mawjudat) in their nondifferentiated, indistinctive mode of being. Ontologically, it mediates between

al-ahadiyya and al-wahdaniyya and is also referred to as the

state of “Muhammadan Reality” (al-haqiqa al-muhammadiyya).

3. Divine Uniqueness (al-wahdaniyya): the state of “second determination”

(al-taayyun al-thani) that represents God’s knowledge of

his Essence, attributes, and all existents in their differentiated, distinctive mode of being. It is also referred to as the state of “Human

Reality” (al-haqiqa al-insaniyya). The first three states of Being

concern Being in the primordial stage, yet, primordality as well as

precedency and succession in the above states must be understood

as intellectual and not temporal qualifications.

4. The World of Spirits (alam al-arwah): the state of simple, abstract

cosmic entities, those “in the likeness of which, and in accordance

with whose essences, manifestation is fashioned.”

5. The World of Similitude (alam al-mithal): the state of subtle,

composed cosmic entities, those which are not susceptible to division,

portioning, separation, or conjunction.<sup>25</sup>

6. The World of Bodies (alam al-ajsam): the state of dense, composed

cosmic entities, those which are susceptible to division, portioning,

separation, and conjunction.<sup>26</sup>

7. Man (al-insan): the last and the sum total of all manifest states, the bodily and the spiritual as well as the states of divine uniqueness and divine solitude.

Fig. 2.1 The seven states of Being viewed from various perspectives.

Viewing the states of Being from different standpoints, there is only one state of nonmanifestation (al-lazuhur), that of Transcendent Unity, and six states of universal manifestation.<sup>28</sup> The first three represent the states of Being in the Platonic sense, while the other four represent the states of becoming. In terms of the creative process, there are internal and external modes of differentiation. Internally, the second state is the state of first determination, while the third is the state of second determination. The other four states are concerned with external existence.

These states also identify, as al-Hindi puts it, three distinct modalities or “homes” (mawatin) of the world. The first home is in the first determination wherein the world is designated as divine “business” (shuun), in the sense that the world is God’s own concern: “He creates what he will” (30:54).<sup>29</sup> The expression comes from the Quranic verse “every day he is engaged in a divine business (shan)” (55:29). The second home is in the second determination, wherein the world is designated as “immutable essences” (ayan thabita). The third home is in the “exterior” (al-kharij), in the realm of existence, wherein the world is designated as “external essences” (ayan kharijiyya).<sup>30</sup>

In terms of al-Ghazali’s analogies, the three mawatin of the world can be compared to the stages of architectural production. The first two modalities, the divine business and immutable essence, correspond to the stages of design (taqdir), wherein the designed object is still contained in an unmanifest mode within the designer’s mind. The architectural drawing, which equates al-Ghazali’s

nuskhat al-alam, the blueprint of the world, corresponds to the world of spirits, the first state of the external essences (ayan kharijiyya), which includes both the blueprint and its embodiment. Al-Hindi's hierarchy of the three homes forms the basis of the following analyses of the process of universal manifestation.

#### The Primordial Presence

The primordial presence (al-hadra al-qad ima), as distinct from the divine presence (al-hadra al-ilahiyya), is the presence of divinity that precedes conceptually all qualifications and determinations, including those of firstness, absoluteness, and unity. It is the presence associated with the first state of Being (al-ahadiyya) from the verse: "Say: He is God, the One (ahad)!" (112:1). Although it has a conceptual presence, this state is characterized by existential absence, as our comprehension of it is based on the denial of all comprehensible definitions and conditions. It is the presence of the Essence that the Sufis compare to the geometrical point.

#### Nondetermination

In the Tawasin, al-Hallaj refers to the point as "the meaning of unity, but not Unity."<sup>31</sup> He presents several mystical and graphical references to the symbolism of the point, the line, the circle, and the alphabet. "The circle has no door," he writes, "and the point in the middle of the circle is the meaning of truth."<sup>32</sup> In the Sufi teachings, the symbolism of the point (nuqta), literally "drop," "dot," is a consistent and recurrent theme. In Kitab al-Nuqta (The Book of the Point), al-Jili presents a sophisticated exposition of the meaning of the point, seen as a potent symbol of the ultimate Reality (haqiqat al-haqaiq), a graspable geometrical principle capable of revealing the relationship the divine Essence bears to the world.<sup>33</sup> In their fascinating discourse on the symbolism of the point, Sufis often

quote a prophetic tradition that reduces all human knowledge to the dot of the Arabic letter ba (B). I will discuss this later.

To understand the ontological relation Sufis draw between the point and the first state of Being, we need to reinvokethe Ikhwan's distinction between the sensible and intelligible geometry, which they extend to the point. The sensible point (*al-nuqta al-hissiyya*), they explain, is a physical entity that has parts, whereas the intelligible point (*al-nuqta al-aqliyya*) is a nonspatial principle that has no parts.<sup>34</sup> In a treatise on the alphabetical symbolism, al-Jili reiterates this differentiation: "Know that, in reality, the point cannot be determined by sight, because [it is indivisible while] all that is manifested by it in the bodily world is divisible. So the perceived point is an expression (*ibara*) of its reality, the definition of which is a "single, indivisible substance" (*jawhar fard la-yatajazza*)."<sup>35</sup> Thus understood, the sensible point is the smallest spatial entity in the Euclidian geometry whose repetition produces a line, the repetition of which produces a plane, the repetition of which produces a volume. This spatial entity has a dimension, however indefinitely small. For the repetition of a dimensionless point cannot produce a dimension any more than the addition of zeros can produce a number. By contrast, the intelligible point is a mental concept, denoting the dimensionless, indivisible principle that lies beyond the confines of spatial conditions. The sensible point is the physical embodiment of the intelligible point, which not only escapes space and spatial conditions but also defies our affirmative comprehension. We are unable to attribute to the point any essential qualities whereby it may become affirmatively graspable. When we describe the point as indivisible, formless, dimensionless, without extension or duration, and so forth, we are in fact negating its spatio-temporal qualities. Negative attributes can only tell us

what a thing is not. Although negating is a form of knowing, an entity can only be grasped by means of its affirmative attributes. As Ibn Arabi explains that “negation is not an essential attribute (sifa dhatiyya), for all essential attributes of beings are affirmative (thubutiyya).”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, when we try to define the intelligible point by negative attributes, we are forced to employ spatiotemporal qualities, which the intelligible point transcends. By such definitions we reveal our tendency to presume that such sensible qualities are potentially latent in it. However, neither can these negative attributes determine, limit, or define the quality of the intelligible point nor can they render it graspable. The ungraspability and incomprehensibility of the point renders it a potent symbol of the ineffable divine Essence (al-dhat) or God in the state of nondetermination. “Whenever I speak of the Point I mean the Secret of the Essence,” says the twentieth-century Sufi Ahmad al-Alawi in his treatise on the symbolism of the Arabic letters.<sup>37</sup> And al-Jili says that “the point is a symbol (ishara) of God’s essence that is hidden behind the veils of his multiplicity.”<sup>38</sup> The point stands for the Essence because it is just as ungraspable and incomprehensible to say that the point is formless, dimensionless, indivisible, and so forth, as the Quranic description of God: “Naught is as his likeness” (42:11). Negation is the only way to know of the divine Essence and, by extension, of its symbol, the point.<sup>39</sup> Ibn Arabi explains the state of divinity to which the point is ontologically tied: “Praise be to God before whose oneness there was not a before, unless the Before was He, and after whose singleness there is not an after, except the After be He. He is, and there is with Him no after nor before, nor above nor below, nor far nor near, nor union nor division, nor how nor where nor when, nor time nor moment nor age, nor being nor place. And He is now as He was. He is the One without oneness, and the Single without singleness . . . He is the

First without firstness, and the Last without lastness. He is the Outward without outwardness, and the Inward without inwardness.”<sup>40</sup>

Sufis teach that the point is the principle of geometry just as 1 is the principle of number. Here the correspondence can be observed on two levels. In Arabic “unity” is denoted by two terms: *ahad*, as in “Say: he is God, the One (*ahad*)” (112:1); and *wahid*, as in “Your God is One (*wahid*) God” (2:163).

The conceptual difference between these two terms can be traced in the Sufi teachings. The unmanifest state of Transcendent Unity is designated by the term *al-ahadiyya*, from *ahad*, while the two manifested states of the divine Solitude and Uniqueness are designated by the terms *al-wahda* and *al-wahdaniyya*, respectively, from *wahid*. The two manifest states of Being share the same etymological root with the number 1, *wahid*, whereby they are deliberately distinguished from *al-ahadiyya*, whose root, *ahad*, though it connotes the idea of unity, signifies unity without likeness, not even in numbers. In geometrical terms, the sensible point, as the principle of sensible geometry, corresponds to the 1, as the principle of numbers. For just as the number 1 is a reflection of the unmanifest Unity (*ahad*) in the realm of numbers, so the sensible point is a reflection of the intelligible point in the realm of geometry. The unmanifest Unity, however, is that which lies beyond both realms of number and geometry altogether. It can be analogically equated with the 0 or the pure “whiteness” (*bayad*) in Ghazali’s example. Whiteness and 0, as Unity unaffirmed, are symbolic expressions of that which lies beyond the first comprehensible affirmation of Being, expressed by the sensible point and the number 1. Zero is to 1 what the whiteness is to the point and what possibility is to actuality: the state of innumerable unity and infinite multiplicity.<sup>41</sup>

In *al-Tuhfa al-Mursala*, al-Hindi takes this analogy a step further. He

says that Being (wujud) is to beings (mawjudat) as light is to colors and figures.

Being is the reality whereby things become conceivable just as light is the condition whereby colors and figures become perceivable. But unlike light, he says, Being in its manifestation is ceaseless and more intense, and, therefore, only the elites are aware of its presence.<sup>42</sup> He further explains that all beings (mawjudat), in respect of Being (wujud), are none other than the Real (al-haqq), but in respect of determination are other than the Real. Otherness is a relative matter. In reality, he adds, even the shape is none other than Real. To illustrate this view, al-Hindi uses the example of the various objects made out of water, such as hail, waves, and ice in the form of a cup. In reality, he says, all of these are none other than water, but in terms of their specific forms they are obviously other than water. Likewise is the mirage, which is air appearing in the form of water; in reality, it is none other than air, but in appearance it is other than air.<sup>43</sup>

Relating this to space, the geometrical point in its two modalities, the sensible and the intelligible, may be taken to represent the ubiquitous presence of Being in both its determined and undetermined states. Viewed from al-Hindi's standpoint, the point can be seen to be the basis of spatial compositions in the same way that Being is considered to be the inner reality of all beings. Ibn Arabi develops this argument considering the point in its own right and in what it causes to appear in the form of spatial composition. In reality, Ibn Arabi says, a spatial object is none other than the point, but in determination it is other than the point. Explaining the nature of the radius, he writes: "A line terminates at a point. Its beginning and its end are and are not parts of it, as you may wish to say. What should be said of the line is this: neither are the points the line itself nor other than itself . . . The line is made up of points, it cannot be conceived

in any other way. The plane is made up of lines, so it is made up of points, and the body is made up of planes, so it is made up of lines, which are made up of points.”<sup>44</sup>

In summary, the point, itself undetermined and unmanifest, is the principle of determinate manifestation. It is to space what the divine Essence is to the world: the unmanifest principle of manifestation. In its intelligible mode, it encompasses the entirety of space, for potentially all is conceived within it. In its sensible mode, it is the generative principle of space, for all bodies in space can be geometrically reduced to a point: it is both the whole and the part.

#### The Divine Presence

The divine presence (al-hadra al-ilahiyya), as distinct from the primordial presence (al-hadra al-qadima), is the presence wherein God is known through his names and attributes. It is the state in which the unity of the Essence becomes associated with the multiplicity of the names and attributes. The Sufis teach that in his primordial presence God desired to be known, to reveal the mysteries of his inner treasure, so he descended from his incomprehensible supremacy, the state of Transcendent Unity, through the state of Solitude, to the state of Uniqueness. Therein he revealed his names and attributes as means whereby he may become knowable. By this descent the nonqualified and undetermined Being becomes manifest in two qualified and determined states first and second determination—revealing the divine presence.

#### Unity and Multiplicity

The act of manifestation is associated with a perplexing philosophical question: how could the simple unity produce the rich and complex multiplicity? The tradition that says, “God was and nothing with him; and he is now even as he was,” raises other related questions.<sup>45</sup> How could God remain as he was after creating the world? How could God, the one, when there was nothing with him

remain the same one when the multitude of existents is associated with him?

This is the paradox of unity and multiplicity implicit in the act of manifestation, the paradox of the one becoming many and at the same time remaining one, of God being at once the name and the named.<sup>46</sup> The key to understanding this paradox, the Sufis teach, is the double negation: to think of external beings as neither God himself nor other than himself. It is like looking in a mirror and seeing your image: the reflected image is neither yourself, since you are standing apart from the mirror, nor other than yourself, since it is your own and not anyone else's. If you imagine that you are able to look in a number of mirrors simultaneously and see your reflected images in all of them at once, then the paradox of unity and multiplicity is partially resolved. And if you imagine these mirrors to be infinite in number, reflecting infinite aspects of your personality, then the paradox is almost resolved. What remains to be explained is the "mirrors": what are they and where do they come from? In this analogy, the mirrors are none other than the created beings, the things of the world, whose appearance coincides with the manifestation of the divine reflections or realities.<sup>47</sup> At the first level of determination, these realities are described as divine business (shuun ilahiyya), whereas at the second level of determination they are designated as immutable essences (ayan thabita).

#### First Determination

Al-taayyun al-awwal, the state of the first determination, al-Hindi explains, designates God's knowledge of his Essence, attributes, and all beings (mawjudat) in an undifferentiated, indistinctive mode. This state is often likened to the existence of a tree in the seed prior to its physical materialization. The act of knowing is the first affirmative attribute that determines the Essence.

Knowing implies a triplicity: knower, known, and knowledge, affirmatively

differentiating among the Essence (knower), the names (known), and the connection (knowledge); or among unity, multiplicity, and affinity.

Fig. 2.2 The circle as a symbol of divinity in the state of first determination.

In geometrical terms, this initial order can be traced in the ternary structure of the circle seen as the first qualification of the point: the unity of the center (knower), the multiplicity of the points of the circumference (known), and the connecting radii (knowledge).

Sufis see the revelation of the divine's infinite names from the incomprehensible Essence as analogous to the projection of the circumference's indefinite number of points from the indivisible center and to the reflection of God's "forms" in the mirrors of beings. Through this ontological relationship, the circle becomes the symbol of the first comprehensible form of unity the Essence takes on. The circle's inherent geometrical qualities are thus conditioned by the metaphysical reality it embodies. The circle, therefore, offers effective cues that help us understand the paradox of unity and multiplicity. Ibn Arabi explains:

Every line projecting from the center to the circumference is equal to its companion and terminates at a point on the circumference. In itself the center neither multiplies nor increases despite the multitude of lines that project from it to the circumference. The point of the center relates to every point on the circumference by its same essence. For if it were to relate to one point on the circumference by other than that by which it relates to another, it would be divisible, and it would not be true that it is one, yet it is. So it relates to all the points, in spite of their multitude, by none other than its essence. It is certain then that multiplicity manifests from the one Essence without this Essence being multiplied.<sup>48</sup>

The Quran teaches that the world depends in its existence on God:

“O mankind! It is you who are in need of God”; while God is “the self-sufficient, the glorified” (35:15). He is “independent of all creatures” (3:97).<sup>49</sup> Ibn Arabi sees in the circle a confirmation of this. Although the center and the circle are mutually dependent on each other’s presence, in the sense that circularity demands a center just as centrality demands a domain, the center, as a point, remains autonomous and self-sufficient on its own.<sup>50</sup> The circle, by contrast, has no state wherein it can dispense with its dependency on the center. Just like an image in a mirror: its existence depends upon the presence of the one whose image is being reflected while the one remains independent on its own.

In the state of first determination, al-Hindi explains, the world is designated as divine business (shuun ilahiyya), a modality that, according to Ibn Arabi, differentiates three things: Being (al-wujud), non-Being (al-adam), and the possible (al-mumkin). This corresponds to the ternary structure of the knower, known, and knowledge and its geometrization in the circle. Ibn Arabi explains: “The divine business (al-shan) in itself is as the point in relation to the circumference and that which is in between. The point is Being (al-haqq), the space outside the circumference is non-Being (al-adam), or, say, darkness, and that which is in between the point and the space outside the circumference is the possible (al-mumkin) . . . We have been given the point because it is the origin of the existence of the circle’s circumference that was manifested by the point. Likewise, the possible does not manifest except by Being and the circumference of the circle.”<sup>51</sup>

Fig. 2.3 The world as divine business (shan) according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt).

The differentiation of Being, non-Being, and the possible at the first level

of determination is also described as God descending from the level of absolute oneness to the level of singleness (*fardiyya*, from *fard*, “odd”).<sup>52</sup> Singleness is the level of the affirmative differentiation of the act of knowing, which is coincidental with the creative act. Knowing presupposes the existence of the known, the possible world. The nature of the divine creative act is in harmony with the initial structure of determination. Ibn Arabi explains:

Know, may God guide you, that the creative order is in itself based on singleness (*fardiyya*), wherein triplicity (*tathlith*) is implicit, since singleness begins from the number 3 upward. Three is the first single (*fard*, “odd”) number. It is from the presence of singleness that the world has come into existence.

God says: “and our word unto a thing, when we intend it, is only that we say unto it: Be! and it is” (16:40). Here is an Essence, one with a Will and a creative Word. Without this Essence, its Will, which is its turning towards bringing something in particular into existence, and its uttering of the word “Be!” to that particular thing at the moment of turning, that thing would not have come into existence.<sup>53</sup>

In the *Futuhāt* Ibn Arabi translates this creative triplicity into a geometrical form. He illustrates the triplicity of the divine creative act with reference to the circle: the center stands for the Essence, the radius for the Will, and the circumference for the coming into being by the word Be!

The line projecting from the central point to a single point on the circumference represents the predestination each creature has from its creator-most transcendent.

It is his saying: “and our word unto a thing, when we intend it, is only that we say unto it: Be! and it is.” Will here is that line we assumed as projecting from the point of the circle to the circumference. It is the divine orientation (*al-tawajjuh al-ilahi*) that determines the existence of that point of the

circumference. The circumference is the same “circle of potential beings” (dairat al-mumkinat), and the point in the center, which determines the points of the encompassing circle, is the necessary, self-sufficient Being (wajib alwujud li-nafsihi).<sup>54</sup>

Thus viewed, the circle’s inherent order provides an immediate expression or materialization of many Quranic concepts. Referring to the verse, “he is the first and the last, and the outward and the inward” (57:3), Ibn Arabi says: “The world is between the center and the circumference: the center is the first, and the circumference is the last.”<sup>55</sup> He adds: “every point of the circumference is an end to a line, while the point out of which a line projects to the circumference is the beginning of that line, so he is the first and the last. He is the first of every possible being just as the point is the beginning of every line.”<sup>56</sup> And with reference to the verses, “And God, all unseen, surrounds them” (85:20), and “Verily, he is surrounding all things” (41:54), Ibn Arabi writes: “If you assume lines projecting from the point to the circumference (muhit), these will terminate but unto a point. The whole circumference bares the same relationship to the point, which is his saying: ‘And God, all unseen, surrounds (muhit) them,’ and his saying: ‘Is not he surrounding (muhit) all things?’”<sup>57</sup>

The Arabic word for “circumference,” muhit, which also means “surrounding” and “encompassing,” provides a linguistic support for the mystical interpretations.<sup>58</sup> The symbolism of the circle is also used to illustrate and confirm some theological dogmas, such as the ultimate return to God at the end of the world. The lines projecting from the point of the center to the points of the circumference that stand for all possible beings remind us, according to Ibn Arabi, of our ultimate destination, as stated in the Quran: “and unto him the whole matter will be returned” (11:123); “As he brought you forth, so you shall

return” (7:29); “God initiates the creation, then the recreation, then unto him you will be returned” (30:11).<sup>59</sup> Ibn Arabi sees in the circle and the spherical form of the cosmos a constant reminder of this ultimate return.

Fig. 2.4 The geometric representation of the divine creative command according to Ibn Arabi.

Know that since the world is spherical in shape, man longs at the end of his life to his beginning. Our springing forth from nonexistence to existence was by him, and to him we shall return, as he says: “and unto him the whole matter will be returned” . . . Do you not see how when you start drawing a circle you keep encircling the line until it terminates unto its beginning: then it is a circle. Had the matter been otherwise, had we sprung forth from him in a straight line, we would not have returned unto him, and his saying: “then unto him you will be returned” would not have been true, but he is the truthful.<sup>60</sup>

#### Second Determination

The circle, the symbol of the state of first determination, is the first comprehensible form unity takes on in the process of manifestation. It represents the first polarization that differentiates the unity of the Essence from the multiplicity of the names, but without distinguishing the names from one another. Just like the points of the circumference: they are all alike and equally related to the original point-center. At the state of second determination (al-taayyun al-thani), the divine names become differentiated and distinguished from one another, manifesting an infinite number of patterns. These patterns crystallize the infinite sets of relationships and combinations that bind various divine names together. Geometrically, these patterns can be seen as an indefinite number of geometrical configurations that can be inscribed within a circle, each as it were crystallizing one of the divine patterns. A square, for example, can be seen to

geometrically crystallize the pattern of quadrature, which in turn crystallizes the relationship that binds any four distinct yet related divine names, such as the Living, the Knowing, the Willing, and the Powerful. Ibn Arabi assimilates this process to the differentiation of geometrical forms within a circle: “The world in its entirety is circular in form, within which are then differentiated the forms of all figures, such as quadrature, triplicity, hexad, and so on indefinitely.”<sup>61</sup>

For Sufis, combinations of the divine names constitute the regulating patterns of existence, varying according to the subjects they designate. The creation of the world, for example, requires a pattern different to that required for the subsistence of the world after it has been created. Likewise, different modalities of the divine reveal different patterns. A different combination of attributes is needed to know God as the creator of the world than the ones needed to know him as the self-sufficient. Sufis discern a structure in these infinite varieties of patterns, based on a perceived hierarchy in both single and combined divine names. Quadrature and triplicity occupy, with regard to the creative process, primary positions in this hierarchy.

#### Quadrature: Pattern of Proliferation

Sufis teach that God’s manifestation and becoming knowable coincides with the creation of the world. For this creative emergence to be fulfilled a certain combination of divine names is necessary. According to Ibn Arabi, this is achieved through four principal names: the Living (al-hayy), the Knowing (al-alim), the Willing (al-murid), and the Powerful (al-qadir), which manifest the attributes of Life, Knowledge, Will, and Power. There are several Quranic references to these names: “God! There is no God save him, the Alive, the Eternal” (3:2); “He creates what he will. He is the Knower, the Powerful” (30:54). The logic that brings

these four names together is based on human creativity that necessitates these four indispensable attributes. In order to be able to produce anything, one must, first of all, be alive, must know what one is intending to produce, must have the will for production, and must be able to produce. This is the creative quadrature according to human logic. It might derive from the physical order, but its roots lie in the metaphysical world. The physical order of existence, as Ibn Arabi affirms, is necessarily rooted in divine realities.<sup>62</sup> If this is the way we naturally conceive of the creative act, it is because divine realities structure our modes of thinking according to the original order of things.<sup>63</sup> This creative quadrature reveals the first trace of order, the exemplar of all quadratures in the created world. The nearest cognate pattern to the creative quadrature is that which binds the divine names mentioned in the verse: “He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward” (57:3).<sup>64</sup> Already linked to the structure of the circle, this combination describes the position of the creator in the created world.

Fig. 2.5 The first stage of manifestation according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt).

Within the creative quadrature Ibn Arabi traces a hierarchy. Life, he says, is the primary attribute since it is the necessary condition for all other attributes. Knowledge follows Life in the hierarchy. Al-Qashani considers Knowledge to be the leader of the attributes, on the basis that although one’s creative ability hinges on being alive, being alive does not presuppose the other creative attributes.<sup>65</sup> For Ibn Arabi, however, Life is the very condition of existence, including the existence of Knowledge, hence its primacy. Most Sufis, however, concur with Ibn Arabi on the primacy of both Life and Knowledge over Will and Power. The logical basis of Ibn Arabi’s hierarchy concerns the domain of influence and the limits of the realm to which the presence of each of these attributes extends in the creative process. Being the very condition of all attributes Life occupies the highest

position in the hierarchy. Knowledge follows, since its domain of influence extends to both the realm of necessary Being and the realm of possibility, which includes what can and cannot exist (al-mumkin wa al-muhal). Then follows Will, whose domain of influence is restricted to the realm of the possible by exercising a preference as to what may and may not exist. Power is the last in the hierarchy, being the most restricted, since its function is confined to bring into existence the possibility already given a preference for existence.<sup>66</sup>

This hierarchy is conducive to another kind of differentiation, in which each attribute acquires an active or passive generative quality. The primary attributes of Life and Knowledge are considered to be active, acting upon the secondary attributes of Will and Power, which are passive. Ibn Arabi considers that just as Life is the condition of Knowledge, Will is the condition of Power.

Fig. 2.6 The second stage of manifestation according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt).

So Will is to Power as Life is to Knowledge. Accordingly, Life draws Will into its state, and Knowledge draws Power into its state. The articulation of the creative quadrature's original hierarchy into active and passive, conditioning and conditioned, form the divine model for all other creative orders that rely on the agency of active or passive qualities. "The created world, in its entirety, is passive in relation to God," Ibn Arabi says, "while in itself is active in parts and passive in others."<sup>67</sup>

The creative quadrature of divinity is novel since it occurs without a preceding model. Every quadrature that follows, in this as well as in other domains, is but a reproduction of this novel order. With reference to the prophetic tradition, which says that creation started with the Intellect (al-aql) followed by the creation of the Soul (al-nafs) from the Intellect, Ibn Arabi traces the second stage of manifestation: "God brought into existence the

first Intellect from the attribute of Life and the Soul from the attribute of Knowledge. So the Intellect was the condition for the existence of the Soul as Life was the condition for the existence of Knowledge. The two passive realities in relation to the Intellect and the Soul were Universal Matter (al-haba) and Universal Body. These four were the origin whence all forms in the world were manifested.”<sup>68</sup>

At this stage Ibn Arabi introduces a new element, “Nature” (al-tabia), between the Soul and Universal Matter. Nature, as Ibn Arabi describes it, is an intelligible reality, a force, that has no essence (ayn). We know it through its effects in the physical world, which manifest through the agency of four realities heat (harara), cold (buruda), dryness (yubusa), and moistness (rutuba).<sup>69</sup>

In our bodily experiences we sense the effects of these four forces of Nature in the phenomenal world, not Nature per se. The working of Nature, Ibn Arabi explains, displays a quaternary structure that resonates with the original creative quadrature:

Between the Soul and Universal Matter there is the state of Nature. It, too, is based on four realities, two of which are active, and two are passive. Yet all are in the state of passivity with regard to the source whence they proceeded. These are heat, cold, moistness, and dryness. Dryness is passive in relation to heat, and moistness is passive in relation to cold. Heat is from the Intellect, and the Intellect is from Life; hence the nature of life in the sensible bodies is heat. Cold is from the Soul, and the Soul from Knowledge; hence knowledge, when settled, is usually described by the “cold of certainty” and by “snow”<sup>70</sup> . . . As dryness and moistness are passive with regard to heat and cold, Will demands dryness because it belongs to its state, and Power demands moistness because it belongs to its state. And since Power is restricted to bringing-into-existence in particular, it is duly charged with imprinting the nature of life, that is, heat and moistness,

in the bodies.<sup>71</sup>

Fig. 2.7a The third stage of manifestation according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt, a: Dar Sadir ed.).

Fig. 2.7b The third stage of manifestation according to Ibn Arabi (MS. 1328).

Ibn Arabi says that all forms (suwar) and figures (ashkal) are manifested in the Universal Matter and the Universal Body. The form of our world is one of these “forms and figures.” Referring to the Quranic verse, “the heavens and the earth were of one piece (martuqa), then we parted them, and we made every living thing of water” (21:30), he says, heaven and earth were first manifested in the form of an undifferentiated, indistinctive mass (martuqa, literally “stitched together”).

“Then God turned to unstitching the sewn mass in order to distinguish between their (i.e., heaven and earth) essences (ayan). Water was the principle of their existence, and that is why he said: We made every living thing of water.”<sup>72</sup> This provides the key for the third stage in the creative process, the stage of manifesting the four simple and ideal elements, Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. Water is the principal element, just as Life, to which it relates, is the principal divine attribute. Ibn Arabi explains the working of the quaternary order at the third stage of manifestation:

First of all, God ordered these four natural realities in a particular pattern (nazm makhsus). He joined heat and dryness, and there was the simple and ideal Fire. He manifested its ruling (hukm) in three places of the Throne’s body (al-arsh), which is the “utmost sphere” (al-falak al-aqsa) and the “Universal Body” (al-jism al-kull). He called the first place “Aries,” called the second place, which is the fifth of the designated places, “Leo,” and called the third place, which is the ninth of the designated places, “Sagittarius.” Then he joined cold and dryness, and there was the simple and ideal Earth. He manifested its ruling in three places of this sphere: He called the first place “Taurus,”

the second “Virgo,” and the third “Capricorn.” Then he joined heat and moistness, and there was the simple and ideal Air. He manifested its ruling in three places of this utmost sphere: He called the first place “Gemini,” the second “Libra,” and the third “Aquarius.” Then he joined cold to moistness, and there was the simple and ideal Water. He manifested its ruling in three places of the utmost sphere: He called the first place “Cancer,” the second “Scorpio,” and the third “Pisces.” This is the division of the sphere of the constellations: there are twelve designated divisions determined by the twenty-eight planets. All is set by the design (taqdir) of the Mighty, the Knower.<sup>73</sup>

This pattern of quaternary manifestation also represents the basic pattern of the cosmogonic proliferation of the many from the maternal source, the point. As the unmanifest source that precedes the manifestation of the many, the point signifies the feminine, progenitive origin wherein all things are conceived as an undifferentiated totality. “Whatever may be the term that you do choose for the first entity,” Ibn Arabi explains, “it will always be feminine.”<sup>74</sup> Geometrically, the unity of mother-point proliferates into the multiplicity of the circumference. The points of this circumference represent the genera of existents. In the same manner that the mother-point first burst open to give birth to the first circumference, the multiplicity of genera, so likewise each genus may in turn proliferate into a multiplicity of species, species into kinds, and kinds into individuals.

Ibn Arabi says that every part of the world may cause the existence of another smaller world similar to, but in no way more perfect than, it; and so likewise “every point may cause the existence of a circumference whose condition is the same as the first one, and so on ad infinitum.”<sup>75</sup> “The principle of all this is the first point,” he writes, “for a line extending from the point-center to a determined point on the

circumference may also extend from it to the points of the half-circle that lies outside the first circle.”<sup>76</sup> The pattern of proliferation at once follows and inscribes the law of unity and multiplicity or the whole and the parts, according to which every part reveals the same order of the whole and as such it forms a whole on its own.

Fig. 2.8 Pattern of proliferation according to Ibn Arabi.

#### Triplicity: Pattern of Formation

Reflecting on the nature of the creative act, Ibn Arabi says that we can only say that God “designs” (yuqaddir) things eternally but not “brings into existence” (yujid) eternally, because it is not possible.<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, he distinguishes two modes of creation: creation by “designing” or “determination” (taqdir) and creation by “bringing into existence” (ijad) or “formation” (takwin). The former is an eternal, creative act that does not involve physical production, whereas the latter is an act that does. The former coexists with God’s knowing of the nonexistent world in its potential state, whereas the latter coexists with the bringing of the world from nonexistence into existence, from potentiality into actuality.<sup>78</sup> The distinction between these two creative modalities is traceable at the linguistic level. In Arabic *alam* and *kawn* are the two distinct terms translated as “world.” The former derives from *ilm*, “knowledge,” with reference to which Ibn Arabi says that the moment God knew himself, he knew the world.<sup>79</sup> The latter derives from the trilateral root *k.w.n.*, literally, *hadath*, that is, “something new,” “a novelty,” “an unprecedented thing,” “occurrence,” from which comes the terms *muhdath* and *huduth*, “ephemeral existence” and “newness,” as opposed to *qadim* and *qidam*, “primordial” and “eternity.”

Although knowing is a creative act, it is not necessarily a physically productive one. Things may be created in the imagination without being brought

into existence physically. Takwin, however, is necessarily a physically productive act, causing the designated thing to exist. The verb kawwana means “to bring into existence,” “to synthesize,” the imperative of which kun (Be!) is the divine creative word. Thus creation has two complementary modes: designative through knowledge and design (taqdir), and productive through bringing into existence and formation (takwin). This conception further supports al-Ghazali’s analogies already discussed.

If quadrature can be viewed as the primary pattern of creation with regard to taqdir, then triplicity is the primary pattern of creation with regard to takwin. This can be traced in the Sufi conceptions of the creative act and of the divine model for bodily formation. The divine creative command, as we have seen, is based on the triplicity of the Essence, Will, and Word. This is considered to be an active triplicity in response to which a passive triplicity appears in the created thing. It is the union of both that causes this thing to exist. In response to the creative command, Ibn Arabi explains, there arises in the thing to be created, too, a singleness, a triplicity, by which the thing, on its part, properly partakes in its own formation and its being brought into being. This is its thing-ness (shayiyya), its hearing (sama), and its obeying (imtithal) the command of the creator concerning its coming into being. So the thing matches the [creative] triad with a triad: its affirmative, though nonexistent, essence corresponds to the Essence of its creator; its hearing corresponds to the Will of its creator; and its obedient acceptance of what has been commanded concerning its formation corresponds to the creator’s utterance of Be!<sup>80</sup>

Formation (takwin) presupposes embodiment that demands a pattern of divine names to be realized. This pattern determines the spatiality of embodiment

through the three dimensions and six directions. Sufis distinguish two complementary modalities whereby God may be known: the creative modality in which God is attached to the world and the self-sufficient modality in which “God is independent of all creatures” (3:97).<sup>81</sup> Both are known through two sets of four names. The creative set consists of the Living, the Knowing, the Willing, and the Powerful, while the self-sufficient set consists of the Living, the Speaking, the Hearing, and the Seeing. The latter relates to the Quranic verse: “Naught is as his likeness; and he is the Hearer, the Seer” (42:11). “For if he hears his speech and sees his Essence,” Ibn Arabi writes, “surely then, his Selfexistence without being related to the world is complete.”<sup>82</sup> Together, the two modalities reveal the following seven divine names: the Living, the Speaking, the Knowing, the Hearing, the Seeing, the Willing, and the Powerful. These are unanimously accepted by traditional Islamic schools as the seven principal divine names, from which all other names derive. In premodern theological and mystical literature, they are known as the “mothers of all names” (ummahat alasma). For Sufis, the seven principal names constitute the fundamental order of the divine presence.

Triplicity is inscribed in the seven principal names as the divine pattern of formation that complements quadrature in the creative process. Here triplicity corresponds to the three dimensions of length, width, and depth, which Ibn Arabi considers as embodying the productive triplicity of the creative command “Be!” The triplicity of the dimensions is revealed numerically through the seven principal names together with the Essence, adding up to eight, the first cubic number, being the minimum number of points required for the production of bodies in space. Explaining the structure of this pattern, Ibn Arabi writes:

The ultimate aim of synthesis is the body. The body is eight points only, and what is known from the Real is just the Essence and the seven attributes. Neither are these God himself nor other than himself; likewise, neither is the body other than the points, nor are the points other than the body, nor are the points the body itself. We say that the least of bodies is eight points because the original line arises from two points up; the original plane arises from two lines up, hence the plane arises from four points; and the original body arises from two planes up, hence the body arises from eight points. The body acquired the name of the length from the line, the name of the width from the plane, and the name of the depth from the synthesis of two planes. Thus the body is established upon triplicity, just as the structure of syllogistic reasoning is established on triplicity,<sup>83</sup> and as the origin of being, the Real, becomes manifest by bringing into existence through three Realities: his Essence (huwiyyatuhu), his Turning (tawajjuhuhu), and his Uttering (qawluhu).<sup>84</sup>

The seven principal divine names also determine the six directions—up and down, left and right, front and back—further qualifying the bodies already formed on the triplicity of dimensions. Of these seven names, Ibn Arabi says, only six relate to the possible being, while the seventh, the Living, does not. Insofar as the Living is the condition for the existence of the other six names, it is the point where they all meet. The other six divine names—the Speaking, the Knowing, the Hearing, the Seeing, the Willing, and the Powerful determine the six directions, while the living Essence marks the point where all coincide.<sup>85</sup> Thus viewed, the process of universal manifestation reveals triplicity and quadrature as complementary divine paradigms: one crystallizes the designative aspects of the creative act and the other crystallizes the productive aspects. In this process quadrature underlies the pattern

of proliferation and deployment, whereas triplicity underlies the pattern of synthesis and formation.

#### The Human Presence

“I am the Truth,” cried al-Hallaj, a fatal cry that was said to have led to his prosecution and tragic execution.<sup>86</sup> Yet the great Sufi martyr was only stating boldly what had later become the object of a sophisticated Sufi theory. That man is the mirror image of God became a central theme in Sufi thought, while tasting the divine reality humans embody became the prime object of the mystical experience. In the *Fusus* Ibn Arabi wrote: “I praise him and he praises me, I worship him and he worships me.”<sup>87</sup> Earlier, I referred to al-Hamawi’s metaphor of God’s Eye that never sleeps. In Arabic *insan*, “humankind,” is also translated as “pupil.” The term *insan* is taken to designate humankind, Ibn Arabi explains, because man is to God what the pupil is to the eye, the instrument of seeing. So if God is the light whereby the Eye sees, man is the instrument of “vision” (*basar*) that makes “seeing” possible. Man is *insan* because God “sees” his creatures through him, and it is the comprehensiveness of his reality that makes such vision possible.<sup>88</sup>

#### The Epitome of Creation

In al-Hindi’s multiple states of Being, the first state of determination is also designated as the Muhammadan Reality (*al-haqiqa al-muhammadiyya*), whereas the second state is designated as the Human Reality (*al-haqiqa al-insaniyya*). In the same way these two states of Being are taken to constitute the divine presence, they are taken to constitute the human presence (*al-hadra al-insaniyya*).<sup>89</sup> The human presence is but the other side of the divine presence. The logic of this hinges on the religious concept, which is not peculiar to Islam, that God created man in his image. This being so, man becomes the ultimate

aim of the creation and the first thing God conceived. As God's conception of man's creation coincides with his self-manifestation, the human presence goes through the same stages of determination already discussed. These two stages can be thought of as identifying the idea of man in its ideal and particular determination. For Muslims Muhammad is the ideal model of humankind, just as Christ is for Christians, whereas Adam is the first incarnation of this perfect model. This is what the Muhammadan and Human Realities represent in the constitution of the human presence.

In the *Fusus* Ibn Arabi explains, using numerical symbolism, the structural similarity and concordance between the divine and human presences. When the undetermined unity subjected itself to the process of determination, triplicity was the first order it revealed: unity, multiplicity, and affinity. Thus 3 was the first comprehensible form unity took. Three is also the first odd (*fard*) number, since 1 is not a number but the origin of numbers. *Fard* also means "single" and "individual," of which *farid* means "unique." Ibn Arabi plays on the semantics of *fard* to show how the human presence mirrors that of the divine. In being the first object of divine knowledge, man becomes synonymous with the universe, and the articulation of the concept of 'man' in the divine mind coincides with the manifestation of the names and attributes. Thus the idea of Muhammad, in being the model in the likeness of which man was to be fashioned—according to the hadith: "I was a prophet when Adam was still between water and clay"—equates the divine knowledge in the indistinctive state. This is the wisdom of Muhammad's prophethood, as Ibn Arabi puts it, revealing the triplicity of the state of Being with which he is identified.<sup>90</sup>

In his exposition of Ibn Arabi's *Fusus*, al-Qashani explains that the notion of the Muhammadan Reality designates the first self-determination with which

the primordial Essence qualified itself. This included the determination of the hierarchy of genera, species, kinds, and individuals, the entirety of which Muhammad comprised in his constitution. In this sense, Muhammad was unique. Above his reality there was only the ineffable transcendent Essence. The Muhammadan Reality was particularized through the idea of Adam, with the creation of whom the human presence was realized. Adam was at once the “lens” through which God viewed all beings and the “mirror” in which he viewed his own Being. The otherness of the reflected image externalized divinity in a unique way, revealing the realities of the names in an embodied form.<sup>92</sup> If the divine presence is God revealing his names and attributes, then the human presence is the incarnation of these names and attributes in the human form. In this sense, the human presence becomes the outer face of divinity, while the divine presence becomes the inner face of humanity.<sup>93</sup> Al-Qashani explains the sense in which man is seen to epitomize the realities of the creation. Being last in the creative process, man was as it were the conclusive act, summarizing all the ontological degrees that unfolded in the process of self-determination and refocusing the colors of the ontological spectrum. In brief, the Sufi concept of the ‘human presence’ is based on three principles. First, man, as an idea, was the first to be conceived by God in the creative process; second, man, as an embodied form, was the last creature to be brought into existence; and third, man, in both the ideal and embodied form, constitutes the comprehensive epitome of all manifest states of Being and the sum total of all divine and cosmic realities.

#### Universal Man

The Sufi notion of the human presence is synonymous with that of the Universal Man (al-insan al-kamil/al-kulli). According to al-Hindi, Universal Man is

the state of Being that can be attained through an ascension (uruj), whereby one retraces the process of manifestation back to its original source. Such ascension causes all states of Being with the expanded knowledge they entail to unfold within the individual self, resulting in transcending the limits of individuality and recognizing the universality of one's presence.<sup>95</sup> The notion of the Universal Man is central to Ibn Arabi's writings, which he articulates into a highly sophisticated theory in most of his texts, and specifically in *Insha al-Dawair*, *al-Tadbirat al-Ilahiyya*, *Futuhāt*, and *Fusus*. It is al-Jili, however, who is well known for his comprehensive book on Universal Man.<sup>96</sup> Introducing the book, al-Jili says that "since it was the Real (al-haqq) who is sought in the writing of this book, it is mandatory that we deal in it with the Real-most transcendent, in regard to his names first, because they directly point to him, then in regard to his attributes because of the diversity of essential perfections they express, and because they are the first manifest forms of his revealment."<sup>97</sup> In sixty-three chapters, al-Jili goes through a wide range of metaphysical, cosmological, and eschatological themes, unfolding the dimensions of the Universal Man. Far from being confined to the domain of humanity, the concept encompasses all the realities of Being—spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal—as well as the cosmic structure in its current complexity and its reformation in the hereafter. "The Universal Man," al-Jili writes, "is the pole around whom revolves the spheres of Being from its beginning to its end."<sup>98</sup>

### The Two Exemplars

The human presence, Ibn Arabi explains, comprises two "exemplars" (nuskhatan): outward and inward. The former, temporally produced, is homologous to the whole world; the latter, eternally conceived, is homologous to the divine presence.<sup>99</sup> Through this dual structure man becomes at once the most

universal entity and the most effective mediator between God and the world. The duality of the creator-creature is rendered interactive through the agency of man's two exemplars, since no other worldly being admits the quality of divinity, nor can the divine admit the quality of worldliness, *al-ubudiyya*. Ibn Arabi writes: Man alone possesses two perfect relationships, by one he enters into the divine presence, and by the other he enters into the cosmic presence (*al-hadra alkayaniyya*). So he is called a "slave" with regard to his being an obligated creature that was not and then became, just like the world, and he is called "lord" with regard to his being a vicegerent, to his form, and to his being created in the best stature. Thus, he is, as it were, a mediator between the world and the Real, bringing together the created and the creator. He is the dividing line between the divine and the cosmic presences, as the dividing line between the shadow and sunlight. This is his reality: he has the perfection of both eternity and newness.<sup>100</sup>

Fig. 2.9 The human presence mediating between God and the world.

Ibn Arabi articulates his two-exemplar concept by detailing the way in which the ternary and quaternary patterns of the divine presence are reflected in man's constitution. Here he identifies man by three essential components: nature (*tabia*), body (*jism*), and figure (*shakl*). The state of nature embodies the generative pattern of quadrature; whereas the states of body and figure crystallize the formative pattern of triplicity. The three-fold structure—nature, body, and figure—constitutes the manifest exemplar, the inner face of which corresponds to the three-fold structure of divinity—Essence, attributes, and actions. Ibn Arabi explains:

In his essence, this individual man corresponds to the divine presence. God created him, in respect of his figure and organs, with six directions. These were made manifest through him because he is to the world as the point is to the circumference . . . God also created him, in respect of his nature and the

form of his body, from four, so he has quadrature according to his nature, being the sum of the four elements (arkan). And he structured his body (jism) as to have three dimensions, length, width, and depth. Thus he resembles the divine presence in regard to its Essence, attributes, and actions. These are three states: the state of his figure, which is none other than his directions, the state of his nature, and the state of his body.<sup>101</sup>

Fig. 2.10 The three-dimensional cross as a symbol of the human presence.

The two-exemplar concept allows us to see the agency of the human presence appearing in different modalities. The outward modality becomes identical with the world; whereas its inward modality becomes identical with divinity. In bringing God and the world together the human presence itself tends to dissolve, just as the dividing line between shadow and sunlight that exists only through the existence of the neighboring domains.

The three states that constitute the outward exemplar of the human presence may be synthesized in the form of the three-dimensional cross, its symbol par excellence. The four arms of the horizontal cross mark the quadrature of man's nature; the three axes express the three-dimensionality of his body; and the six arms of the cross projecting from the center graphs the directionality of his unique figure. All are reconciled in the central point, which represents man's centrality in the world.<sup>102</sup>

#### Man's Nature

When God breathed his Spirit into Adam, Ibn Arabi says, the profusion of the Breath generated the quadrature of his nature through the four humours: yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm. These four natures of the human biological structure derive from the four principal elements (arkan): Fire, Earth, Air, Water. The yellow bile came from Fire, the black bile from Earth,

blood from Air, and phlegm from Water. In addition, God provided man with four natural forces—attractive, fixative, digestive, and repulsive—to enable the functioning of these natures. This quaternary pattern reflects the divine creative quadrature—Life, Knowledge, Will, and Power—the model for all created quadratures.<sup>103</sup>

These four natures, as the four principal elements, are referred to as “arkan,” plural of rukn, a “corner” or “corner pillar,” giving the imagery of a quadrangular “structure.” According to Ibn Arabi, this is the primary “structure” of being: “God established being upon quadrature and made it for himself as a house standing upon four arkan, for he is the first, the last, the outward, and the inward.”<sup>104</sup> These four attributes formed the primary quadrature that necessitated the establishment of the “house” of being upon four corner pillars, within the structure of which the world of spirits and the world of bodies were manifested. From the world of divinity this structure prompted the creative attributes of Knowledge, Will, Power, and Utterance, which generated the world of spirits, which is beyond nature, as well as the natural world. The manifestation of the natural quadrature of heat, cold, moistness, and dryness followed and was employed in the generation of the world of bodies, dense and subtle. Before forming the bodies, however, God laid out the spiritual world of “writing” (tadwin) and “inscription” (tastir) that produced the original blueprint, al-Ghazali’s exemplar. This included the quadrature of the Intellect, the Soul, Nature, and Matter, through the agency of which the four elements (arkan) of Fire, Air, Water, and Earth were generated. It is in this divine and cosmic hierarchy that the four humors of the animal body and the four functioning forces were eventually created.<sup>105</sup>

As a whole constituted from the four natures, man reflects the primary divine

quadrature of the first and the last, the outward and the inward in different ways.<sup>106</sup> With regard to God, he is the inward; with regard to the world, he is the outward; with regard to God's intention (al-qasd) in the creation, he is the first; and with regard to his existential formation (al-nash), he is the last. Thus man is first in intention, last in existence, outward in form, and inward in spirit.<sup>107</sup> Holistically, "he is to the world as the point is to the circumference."

### Man's Body

Regarding the spatial formation of an animal body, Ibn Arabi quotes a curious hadith in which the Prophet is reported to have said that "the formation will be established upon the sacrum (al-nasha taqum ala ajb al-dhanab)."<sup>108</sup> Alnash is a specific Quranic term that designates at once the creation and the formation of the world—its structure, spatio-temporal conditions, and sensible forms.<sup>109</sup> The Quran refers to the "first creation" (al-nasha al-ula, 56:63), meaning the world in its current formation, and to the "other creation" (alnash a al-ukhra, 53:47), meaning the world as it will be re-formed in the hereafter.

The expression ajb al-dhanab refers, according to the renowned eighth-century lexicographer and grammarian al-Farahidi, to the lowest point of the spine wherefrom the animal's tail originates.<sup>110</sup> In humans this is known as the sacrum, the triangular-shaped bone wedged between the fifth lumbar vertebra and the coccyx (tailbone), consisting of the five sacral vertebrae fused together.

The sacrum is the heaviest bone of the pelvis and the center of gravity of the skeletal structure. The term comes from Latin, os sacrum, meaning "sacred bone," which points to its significance in medieval Europe, when it was known as the resurrection bone, from which a person will be reborn in the hereafter.<sup>111</sup>

The Islamic tradition seems to have preserved this Christian conception.

The Quranic term al-nasha and its link to the sacrum deserve some attention.

Etymologically, it derives from the triliteral root n.sh., “to grow,” “to be alive,” of which anshaa means “to create,” “to invent,” “to produce,” and “to compose.” The Quran says: “He brought you forth (anshaakum) from the earth” (11:61). Anshaa also means “to begin,” “to start,” and “to commence doing something.” Hence the verse, “He it is who produces (anshaa) gardens trellised and untrellised” (6:142) means that “he invented them and commenced their creation.”<sup>112</sup> The term anshaa has many applications in poetry and architecture. In poetry, anshaa means “to compose a poem” and “to commence reciting it”; in architecture, it means “to commence setting up a structure.” Therefore, insha is associated with building a structure.

The above hadith, which many religious authorities quote, reveals a concern with the spatiality of formation: how the human body is structured and in what form it will be reconstructed in the other world.<sup>113</sup> Seen as the only nonperishable (la yabla) component of the body, the sacrum provides the element of continuity between the two creations. Ibn Arabi interprets the hadith as concerning the spatial structure of the body. He explains that the sacrum represents the center whence the body springs forth and upon which it is symmetrically established. It is the focal point of growth, which occurs through three centrifugal movements: downwards, upwards, and outwards. In humans, the downward movement unfolds the lower part of the body, from the sacrum to the feet; the upward movement unfolds the upper part of the body, from the sacrum to the head; and the outward movement unfolds the body in the four directions of right, left, front, and back.<sup>114</sup> Thus the state of man’s body refers to his spatial structure in the form of the three-dimensional cross, the divine pattern of formation.

Fig. 2.11 The three movements of spatial unfolding.

Premodern Muslim physicians did not seem to have shared this view. Ibn Sina, for instance, describes in detail how the human body originates from the heart, the first organ of an embryo to develop in the mother's womb.<sup>115</sup> From the spatio-comogonic perspective, however, the sacrum seems to have been considered the center of the body. The proportional system of the human body developed by the Ikhwan in their epistle on music adds support to this idea.<sup>116</sup> A well-developed body, free of any kind of deformation, they posit, has a definite proportion based on its hand-span. The height from the feet to the top of the head should measure eight hand-spans, which equals the distance between the tips of the fingers when the arms are opened wide in opposite directions as a bird opening its wings.<sup>117</sup> This position defines a square, the center of which is a point that lies at the top of the thigh, which the Ikhwan consider to be the midpoint of the body. If the center of the square thus defined does not coincide with the sacrum, since the Ikhwan do not refer to it, it is nonetheless associated with a term that connotes the concept of 'centrality.' The Ikhwan refer to the top of the thigh bone where it joins the hip, the level on which falls the midpoint of the body, by the term *al-huqq*, from *haqqi*, "the middle of a thing." This term derives from the triliteral root *h.q.q.*, "true" or "real," from which comes God's name *al-haqq*, "Truth" or "Real." This term correlates the notion of centrality with that of reality and permanence, resonating with the hadith of the sacrum that describes it as the only component of the human body that does not decompose (*la yabla*). The state of the body of the human presence exemplifies the way in which natural bodies expand in space from their source, the point-center. Expansion occurs through physical movements of growth, which reflect the intelligible movements of manifestation, whereby the divine Essence disengages itself from primordial stillness and "moves" into the world of existence. Ibn Arabi describes

this creative movement as the “movement of love,” that is, God’s passion to be known, without which the world would not have been manifested.<sup>118</sup> Al-Qashani expounds on the notion of intelligible movements (al-harakat al-ma’qula), explaining the way in which they mediate cosmic existence (al-wujud al-kawni).

Just as the sensible movements of upward, downward, and horizontal, he says, the intelligible movements designate three conceptual orientations. First is the reversed movement of “productive creation” (al-takwin): it is God’s turning downward in order to bring the lower world into existence. Second is the rectilinear movement of “innovative creation” (al-ibda): it is his turning upward in order to bring the worlds of the divine names and attributes as well as the worlds of spirits and souls into existence. Third is the horizontal movement of unfolding, turning toward the heavenly bodies, which mediate between the other two from horizon to horizon.<sup>119</sup> The intelligible movements of cosmic creation provide the model according to which the human body unfolds from *ajb al-dhanab*.

The three sensible movements of spatial unfolding are also the movements of growth tendencies. The Sufis differentiate the four kingdoms—human, animal, plant, and mineral—according to the most expressive movement in their growth tendencies. The tendency of humans is to grow upward, of the animal to grow horizontally, of plants to grow downward (their nutritive organ being the root), and of minerals not to grow, to be still. Thus humans are distinguished by their upward, ascending spatial expansion through the “rectilinear movement” (al-haraka al-mustaqima). The animal is distinguished by its horizontal spatial expansion through the “horizontal movement” (al-haraka al-u’uqiyya). And the plant is distinguished by its downward spatial expansion through the “reversed movement” (al-haraka al-mankusa). The synthesis of these three movements, together with the stillness of the mineral, reveals the three-dimensional cross as

the pattern of spatial unfolding.

Along this common view, Ibn Arabi offers another interpretation of growth tendencies and spatial formation of natural bodies, one that is closer to the hadith of the sacrum and al-Qashani's intelligible movements. He says that plants embody the reality of Growth (numuww); animals embody the realities of Growth and Sensation (al-his); and humans embody the realities of Growth, Sensation, and Reason (al-nutq). Thus all embody the reality of Growth; however, since plants cannot intrinsically move except by way of their growth tendency, they are considered representative of the movement of growth in all natural bodies. This means that growth movement occurs in an animal body insofar as it is a plant, for other movements relate to other realities, namely, Sense and Reason.<sup>120</sup> Accordingly, no distinction between movements of growth as such can be made, because the body of a plant grows from the seed in the upward, downward, and outward directions exactly in the same way as an animal body grows from the sacrum. All movements of growth can thus be referred to as "rectilinear." The "reversed" movement, then, becomes the forcible movement (al-haraka al-qasriyya), which is contrary to the movement intrinsic to a natural object according to the law of nature, as, for example, a stone thrown in the air moving upward while its natural movement by gravity is downward. In this view, growth that leads to the formation of bodies in space is considered to occur through the following movements: first, movement from the center (haraka min alwasat), that is, the simultaneous, centrifugal movement or spatial expansion from the origin in all directions; second, movement to the center (haraka ila al-wasat), that is, the simultaneous, centripetal movement of divine sustenance that determines the extent of growth in each direction; and third,

movement within the center (*haraka fi al-wasat*), that is, the essential enlivening movement whereby the essence of the origin subsists.

#### Man's Figure

In the well-known story of Adam's creation, the Quran tells how God informed the angels and the jinn that he was about to set on earth a viceroy before whom they were to prostrate themselves in deference to his superiority. Somewhat baffled, they all did except Iblis who, taking pride in his fiery nature, unrepentantly refused. Having been expelled from paradise because of his rebellious, disobedient attitude, Iblis revealed his sinister intentions: "Now, because you have sent me astray, verily I shall lurk in ambush for them on your right path.

Fig. 2.12 The complementary movements of spatial expansion according to Ibn Arabi.

Then I shall come upon them from before them and from behind them and from their right hands and from their left hands, and you will not find most of them grateful" (7:16–17). The reference to man's directions in this dialogue is rather curious. Why is man identified by his directions? Why only the four horizontal directions? What about the above and the below? What does it mean for Satan to approach man through these directions? Why is Satan's attack spatially referenced? These questions lead us to consider man's figure. The threedimensional cross identifies at once the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the human presence. The state of man's body (*jism*) has led us to consider the quantitative aspect, the dimension, now the state of man's figure (*shakl*) leads us to consider the qualitative aspect, the direction.

In themselves, directions in space are indifferent. The sphere as a spatial expression of all possibility contains all possible directions, which are determined by extensions from the center to the surface. Indefinite in number, all directions

are also equal in significance. The human figure, however, in being structured upon six qualitatively different directions, qualifies space by rendering its directions significantly different. Commenting on the Quranic verse, “The originator of the heavens and the earth” (2:117), Ibn Arabi says that heaven is what ascends and earth is what descends, and man is the one who distinguishes between what is above and below because he is the one with the directions.

The spatial formation of man distinguishes six main directions: front and back, right and left, up and down. This differentiation is based on bodily attributes and functions. Front is the direction of vision toward which man naturally moves; back is the direction of the unknown, of vulnerability; right is the direction of strength, being naturally the stronger side; left is the direction of weakness, being naturally the weaker side; up is the direction of man’s head, pointing heavenward; and down is the direction of his feet, pointing earthward.

Identifying man by his directions in the above verse assumes certain links between directions and one’s virtues and beliefs. So Satan’s approach from the front is understood as making people indulge in the pleasures of the world they see, whereas his approach from the back is understood as making people doubt the reality of the world they do not see, the hereafter. His approach from the right is the corruption he may bring to the soul through its good virtues and from the left through its bad virtues. The above and down were inaccessible by him, for they designate the vertical channel of God’s direct communication and mercy.

Ibn Arabi takes this understanding further. First, he sees in Satan’s spatial reference an indication of human superiority. Satan’s reference to four directions only, he says, is an expression of the limitation of his formation and of his

world. Lacking the reality of transcendence that grants him access to the vertical axis, he remains inferior to man. Man's upright bodily formation generated by the rectilinear movement, as we have seen, sets him apart from all other creatures. This awareness of the uniqueness of verticality has a spiritual significance in the mystical experience. The concept of 'verticality' is viewed to be a spatial expression of the Muhammadan Reality in its eternal presence. The ninth-century Sufi Sahl al-Tusturi (d. 896) speaks of the differentiation of the "light of Muhammad" (nur Muhammad) from the divine light in spatial terms. When God intended to create Muhammad, he says, he projected from his own light a distinct light (azhara min nurihi nuran). "When it reached the veil of the Majesty (hijab al-azama) it bowed in prostration before God. God created from its prostration (sajda) a mighty column (amud) like crystal glass (zujaj) of light that is outwardly (zahir) and inwardly (batin) translucent." It is from this Muhammadan light, al-Tusturi adds, that the human race originated. Adam was the first to be manifested in this way: "God created Adam from the light of Muhammad."<sup>127</sup> Before this, the Muhammad of preexistence had stood as a column before God for a million years "without body (jism) and form (rasm)."<sup>128</sup> "When the preexistential and temporal universe as well as the prophetic<sup>129</sup> and spiritual prototypes had completed the emanation of light ultimately from Muhammad's light, Muhammad was shaped in a body (jasad), in his terrestrial form, from the clay of Adam (tin Adam). This clay of Adam in turn had been formed from the column of light in which Muhammad had served his Lord in preexistence."<sup>130</sup> This column of light, which is "as thick as the seven heavens,"<sup>131</sup> is the archetype man's upright posture embodies. The notion of the 'column of light' emphasizes the significance of the vertical axis and its exclusive association with man. The state of the human figure

is concerned with the meaning of this spatial uniqueness. The Quran speaks explicitly of the human superiority over all creatures and especially over the other two rational creatures, the jinn and the angels. As a living, rational creature with a sensible body, man gathers together in his formation the qualities of two kinds of creatures: creatures endowed with the rational faculty but lacking a sensible body and those with a sensible body but lacking the rational faculty. The former includes the jinn and the angels, and the latter includes the animals and the plants. None of these creatures shares with man one single quality: his verticality. Animals are characterized by their horizontality, plants by their downwardness, and humans alone by their upwardness. Humans share the qualities of horizontality and downwardness with animals and plants, whereas their verticality renders them distinct. Lacking the rational faculty, animals and plants cannot become consciously aware of the significance of their spatial structure, even if it were the same as that of humans. Humans' superior spatial structure gains further significance when coupled with their rationality.

In Satan's attack on man through the four horizontal directions, Ibn Arabi sees a metaphor for depraving and corrupting human psychic characteristics that are associated with these directions. The front is the direction of vision, of the known, so it is associated with confidence and certainty as humans are in command of what happens in front of them. Satan attacks them from this direction by making them skeptical and uncertain, so they may doubt the oneness of God and become polytheists (mushrik). The back is the direction of the unseen, of the unknown, so it is associated with ignorance and fear. Satan attacks people from this direction by exploiting their ignorance and making them disbelievers or making them believe only in the incomparability of God (muattil, one who refuses the analogical relationships between God and the created world). The right is the

direction of strength, so it is associated with power and authority. Satan attacks people from this direction by weakening them, and by exploiting human authority to make them arrogant (mutakabbir). The left is the direction of weakness, so it is associated with pretence and dependence. Satan attacks people from this direction by exploiting their pretentiousness to make them hypocrites (munafiq).<sup>132</sup> The Satanic attack finds support in human earthly nature and sensuous desires. Therefore, Ibn Arabi says, people are ordered to fight him from these directions, which should be fortified according to what the law (al-shar) has ordered them to fortify them with, so Satan would not find a way to approach them.<sup>133</sup> The fortification of these directions takes on cosmic dimensions in the Sufi teaching, wherein four spiritual masters (awtad, “pegs” or “pillars”) are identified with the four directions—east, west, north, and south. By these four “pillars,” Ibn Arabi explains, God preserves the four cardinal directions, one pillar for every direction. And by these four pillars together with the “pole,” al-qutb, the greatest master who represents the cosmic axis, God preserves the existence of the world.<sup>134</sup> Satan has no access to the upward and downward directions because of his limitation. The exclusive verticality people have constitutes their transcendental dimension. It is the dimension that enables them to transcend the horizontality of their animality, to communicate with heaven, and to receive divine pure inspirations free from satanic contaminations. The above, Ibn Arabi says, “is the direction that leads toward the spirit, from which comes truthful inspirations and angelic revelations, and from which knowledge and spiritual realities emanate.”<sup>135</sup> In the context of Sufi teachings, verticality is a spatial expression of human uniqueness, while the six directions comprise an expression of the comprehensiveness of the human reality. By giving meanings to the directions in space, such teaching engenders a particular spatial sensibility based on an awareness of the

psycho-religious significance of directions. The three dimensions and six directions are the spatial conditions that were seen to govern the entire natural world.

Along with human nature, one's body and figure exemplify these conditions, providing a constant reminder of the foundational order of spatial existence.

#### The Presence of the Word

In al-Ghazali's analogy, God did not draw the blueprint of the world; he wrote it. Although drawing might appear to us as more universal than writing and an image more expressive than a word, inscribing, in a sense, conflates drawing and writing, the image and the word. In Ibn Arabi's cosmogony, as we have seen, it is the enunciation of *kun* that brought the world into existence: in the beginning was the word. The transcendent Essence that affirms its unity through the numerical one and the geometrical point also reveals itself as the word. The primordial word, the divine logos, in its uttered and inscribed modes, is the primary means by which the world was actualized. This archaic view has continued to thrive within the Islamic tradition taking on new dimensions.

In Islam the divine word was seen as being incarnated in the sacred text of the Quran; hence it is only natural to speak of the presence of the word.

Schuon draws our attention to the ubiquity and profound influence of the Quranic text when he says: "The verses of the Quran are not only utterances which transmit thoughts; they are also, in a sense, beings, powers, talismans.

The soul of the Muslim is as it were woven out of sacred formulae; in these he works, in these he rests, in these he lives, in these he dies."<sup>136</sup> This certainly resonates with the Sufi perspective, which views the language of the Islamic revelation, Arabic, in both its written and oral forms, as an embodiment of the primordial word, a materialization of the creative enunciation. The underlying patterns of divine realities, discussed above, find immediate expressions

in this domain. The concept of the Unity of Being and all the states it contains, the divine and the human presences, all find immediate correspondences in various aspects of the Arabic language.<sup>137</sup> In the world of utterance and inscription, beings take on, so to speak, a linguistic guise. They become, as Ibn Arabi puts it, “letters inscribed in the spread parchment of existence wherein writing is ceaseless and endless.”<sup>138</sup> The Sufi teachings on the symbolism of the letters have survived well into the twentieth century through figures such as the Algerian shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi (d. 1934), who wrote in the true spirit of the Sufi tradition. His tract on the symbolism of the letters reveals the profundity of Ibn Arabi and al-Jili.<sup>139</sup>

#### The World as a Book

Mirat al-Arifin, a popular treatise on the meanings of the Quran’s opening chapter (al-fatiha) attributed variably to al-Qunawi, Ibn Arabi, and even imam al-Hussayn, opens by saying: “Praise be to God who externalized from the nun (N) what he internalized in the Pen, and brought out into being by benevolence what he treasured in non-Being . . . And glory to him who . . . unrolled the parchment of the world (al-raqq al-manshur) and inscribed the archetypal book (al-kitab al-mastur) by the ink of existence, which manifests all that is latent within the speaker in the form of letters and perfect words.”<sup>140</sup> The metaphor of the world as a book is common in premodern Islam. There are numerous Sufi treatises devoted to the science of letters, ilm al-huruf, whose origin is often attributed to the fourth caliph and the Prophet’s son-in-law Ali bin Abi Talib. The Quranic imageries of the pen, the ink-well of nun, and the divine act of writing provide the basic conceptual tools used by Sufis and other theologians in the development of their metaphorical interpretations. The concepts of the ‘Pen’ (al-qalam) and the ‘Preserved Tablet’ (al-lawh al-mahfuz), the

analogy of the trees as pens and the seas as ink, of the word as a tree, and so on, along with the prophetic traditions that corroborate these Quranic ideas all form the foundation of alphabetical symbolism in Islam. There are also the fourteen mysterious disjointed letters that appear at the beginning of several Quranic chapters. These received great attention in premodern Islam and contributed significantly to the science of alphabetical symbolism. Forming exactly half of the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, these fourteen disjointed letters are seen as representing the spiritual dimension of the alphabet, corresponding to the world of spirits. They are called the “luminous letters” (huruf nuraniyya), in contrast to the other fourteen that are taken to represent the corporeal dimension and are, therefore, called the “tenebrous letters” (huruf zalmaniyya). The science of the letters, Ibn Arabi explains, concerns both the “length” and the “breadth” of the world. The “length of the world” (tul al-alam) refers to the spiritual world, the world of meanings, whereas the “breadth of the world” (ard al-alam) refers to the physical world, the world of bodies.<sup>141</sup> This resonates with his interpretations of the spatiality of the human body already discussed.

In the parallels Sufis draw between the world and the Quran, letters and words acquire individual presences just as other beings do. Everything is brought forth through the creative enunciation mediated by the “Breath of the Compassionate” (al-nafas al-rahmani), the substance of life pervading the universe. In this sense, each letter or sound becomes an entity in its own right, determining and articulating the undifferentiated “sound” of the creative enunciation.<sup>142</sup> Their manifestation coincides with the utterance of the creative command “Be!” (kun) and the exteriorization of the “cosmos” (kawn) in the forms of letters, words, sentences, and texts. The presence of the word thus

emerges from seeing all cosmic entities as phonetic articulations manifested through the articulation of the divine Breath. Mirat al-Arif in says:

Every being is a letter (harf ) in a sense, a word (kalima) in a sense, an isolated, disjointed letter (mufrad wa muqatta ) in a sense, a composed utterance (alfaz murakkaba) in a sense, and a sura in a sense. When we consider only the essence (dhat) of every being without considering its aspects (wujuh), properties (khawas), accidents (awarid), and concomitants (lawazim), as dissociated from the whole, we call it, with reference to this dissociation, a “letter.” And when we consider its aspects, properties, accidents, and concomitants in association with the essence, we call it, with reference to its association with the whole, a “word.” And with regard to the abstraction of every being from the additions and relations, and to the distinction from one another, they are called “isolated, disjointed letters.”<sup>143</sup> And with regard to the nonabstraction of beings from the additions and relations, and to the nondistinction from one another, they are called “composed utterances.” And with regard to the distinction of the universal states of Being from one another, and to every being falling under one state, they are called “chapters” (sura).<sup>144</sup>

The attribute of knowledge, as already discussed, is the first determination of the divine Essence. In the context of alphabetical symbolism, manifestation becomes the “book” that contains the divine knowledge. Here Sufis articulate two concepts concerning the detailed and summarized versions of the “book.”

“Know O well-supported son that the world is two-fold, the world of command and the world of creation, and that each is a book from God’s many books, and that each has an opening, and that all that is detailed in the book is summed up in the opening. So with regard to summing up what is detailed in the book, the opening is called the ‘mother of the book’ (umm al-kitab), and with regard to

unpacking what is summed up in it, this state of detailing is called the ‘clear book’ (al-kitab al-mubin).”<sup>145</sup>

Both concepts derive from the Quran, which is referred to as the “clear book” and its opening chapter (al-fatiha, “that which opens”) as the “mother of the book.” A hadith takes this process of miniaturization further to the point of the first letter.<sup>146</sup> The opening chapter comprises seven verses that are seen as corresponding to the seven principal divine names, which are called the “mothers of the names.” Just as these seven names contain all the divine names, so likewise al-fatiha contains in synoptic form all the truths revealed in the book.<sup>147</sup> Understood as signifying the potential and actual modes of being, the Sufis have applied both concepts at various levels of existence. Consistently, the “mother of the book” refers to the maternal source wherein all is potentially latent, whereas the “clear book” refers to the projected state where the undifferentiated totality is revealed in differentiated forms. At the divine level, the Essence, in that all divine realities are latent within it, is designated as the “mother of the book,” whereas God’s knowledge of himself, which reveals these realities in the form of the names, is designated as the “clear book.” In the world of archetypes, the Pen, in that all cosmic realities are latent within it, is designated as the “mother of the book,” whereas the Preserved Tablet, which reveals these realities as cosmic forms, is designated as the “clear book.” In the world of nature, the Throne (al-arsh), in that all the realities of the physical world are latent within it, is designated as the “mother of the book,” whereas the Footstool (al-kursi), which reveals these realities in the forms of the heavens and the earth, is designated as the “clear book.”<sup>148</sup>

The twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet are viewed to correspond to

the “human formation” (al-nasha al-insaniyya) in both its bodily and spiritual constitution. “Jawahir al-Sirr al-Munir,” a Sufi treatise on the symbolism of the letters attributed to Ibn Sabin, shows in a diagrammatic way how every letter corresponds to one part of the human body. While the outward forms of the letters correspond to the human body, the “Jawahir” says, their inner meanings correspond to the human spirit. The twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet are God’s secrets in the world. “They are formed in the image of a human figure, as a person standing upright, whose creation is perfect, that is, composed of two parts: spirit and body.”<sup>149</sup>

Fig. 2.13 The correlation of the Arabic alphabet and the human body (“Jawahir,” MS. 7127).

The “Jawahir” divides the letters into four kinds: intellectual (fikriyya), uttered (lafziyya), written (raqamiyya), and numerical (adadiyya). Two of these

left hand right hand

kinds, the uttered and the written, are considered to be manifest, and the other two, the intellectual and the numerical, to be hidden. Thus, the latter are seen to be “in the state of the spirit,” and the former “in the state of the body.”<sup>150</sup> In addition to expressing the bodily and spiritual dimension of the human presence, the Arabic letters are also viewed to have different natures, whereby they embody the creative quadrature and correspond to the four arkan—Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. For example, the letter alif (A) is considered to be hot and dry, corresponding to Fire; ba (B) is cold and dry, corresponding to Earth; jim (J) is hot and moist, corresponding to Air; and dal (D) is cold and moist, corresponding to Water. There are several systems that classify the letters according to their natural qualities.

With regard to their calligraphic forms, the letters are seen as being composed

of the primary geometric forms: the point, the line, and the circle. The alif (A), for example, is a vertical line; the ba (B) is a horizontal line with a point underneath; the nun (N) is half a circle with a central point; the lam (L) is half a circle with a vertical line on one end; and so on. In this way the Sufis extend their geometrical symbolism to the alphabet, thereby conflating writing and drawing under the notion of inscription as well as relating the spatial order of the letters to that of the divine and the human presences. The Arabic letters also have numerical values that play a significant role in the Sufi interpretations.

Fig. 2.14 The natural qualities of the Arabic alphabet (“Jawahir,” MS. 7127).

The geometrical point or the alphabetical dot (nuqta) is where it all begins. The Sufis teach that just as all existents are conceived within the primordial Essence, so likewise all letters, words, sentences, and texts are contained within the primordial “dot.” And just as all beings are manifested and differentiated from the incomprehensible Being, so likewise all the letters, words, sentences, and texts are manifested and differentiated from the impenetrable point.

The first two letters of the Arabic alphabet, the alif (A) and the ba (B), present in the presence of the word the traces of the universal realities and order of Being as revealed in the divine and human presences.

#### The Alif

The letter alif (A), written as a vertical stroke ( | ), is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet. The term alif derives from the root a.l.f., “thousand,” the verb of which, allafa, means “to bring together,” “to attune,” “to harmonize,” and “to compose.” The nouns ilf and ilfa mean “familiarity,” “intimacy,” and “harmony.”

Al-Jili relates the meaning of alif to the human feeling of closeness and familiarity (ilfa). The first letter was named “alif,” he says, because, just like

ilfa brings people closer together, it brings all the letters together by forming their shared inner substance.<sup>151</sup> Here al-Jili refers to the names and pronunciation of the Arabic letters, which, in one form or another, contain the alif. Insofar as the alif is a geometrical line, all letters, as geometrical shapes, can also be reduced to it. Al-Alawi explains how the spatial formations of the letters are no more than a transformation of the alif. The ha (H), he says, is simply a hunchback alif, while the mim (M) is a circular alif.<sup>152</sup> The alif is what all the letters have in common.

Islamic mythology provides many interesting narratives on the creation of the alif. The “Jawahir” says that God first created the Pen from a green emerald and the Tablet from white light and then ordered the Pen to inscribe onto the Tablet the destiny, or his knowledge, of the created world. Upon this divine order a “drop” (nuqta, “point”) fell from the nib of the Pen. It overflowed inscribing a line standing upright. When God saw this he decided to make it the first letter of his exalted name Allah. The alif thus became the origin of all the letters just as God’s generosity was the source of all existents.<sup>153</sup> Al-Alawi overlays the same narrative with a poetic imagery: “Indeed the Alif is none other than the Point itself which is an eye that wept or a drop that gushed forth and which in its downpour was named Alif .”

According to Ibn Arabi, the alif has two forms: one in writing as a vertical stroke, the other in utterance as the hamza (hiatus). For him the alif is not a letter but the origin of all letters, just as 1 is not a number but the origin of all numbers. In utterance, the alif is the unobstructed breath emanating from the heart, whose various guttural, palatal, dental, and labial articulations manifest the letters of the alphabet. Numerically, the alif is number 1; geometrically, it is the line; and calligraphically, it is the diameter of the circle within which the other letters are differentiated.

Accordingly, the alif represents the first definable form of unity that emerged from the undefinable point. Unlike all other letters, al-Jili says, the alif is “only one degree distant from the point, for two points together make an alif.”<sup>155</sup> It is the “first definable appearance” of the point. By appearing in the form of the alif the point qualifies itself with firstness. Thus the alif stands for the state of first determination, for divinity in its first knowable state.<sup>156</sup>

As the first affirmation of unity, the alif corresponds to the Muhammadan Reality, the “column of light,” in al-Tusturi’s terms. Al-Jili finds reference to this in the hadith that says that the first thing God created from his Essence was the spirit of Muhammad, and from this spirit he then created the entire world. Here the alif becomes a visual evidence of the first stage in the creative process.

“Every letter is composed from the point, so the point is as a simple substance (jawhar basit), while the letter is as a composed body (jism murakkab). The alif, in that every letter is shaped from it, represents the point. So in its composed form, the alif represents the simple substance of the point, because all the letters are shaped from it . . . And so likewise the Muhammadan Reality from which the entire world is created.”<sup>157</sup> The analogy between the manifestation of the world and the differentiation of the letters is a common theme in the Sufi literature.

In the same way the manifestation of the divine presence was not caused by anything other than the irradiation of Essence itself and its inward love to be known, so was the manifestation of the alif caused by the overflowing of the point. The original alif was “not traced by the pen, nor was it dependent upon it, but sprung from the outward urge of the Point in its principal centre.”<sup>158</sup> The act of overflowing brings out the alif without any detriment to the integrity of the flawless dot that remains transcendent in its eternal incomparability.

The Ba

The letter ba (B), written as a horizontal line with a point underneath it ( . .

), is the

second letter of the Arabic alphabet. It is the first letter of the first word in the Quran, bism, “in the name,” with al-basmala considered as the first verse. Two traditions frequently quoted by the Sufis form the basis of alphabetical symbolism in general and the ba in particular. The first says: “All that is in the revealed books is in the Quran, and all that is in the Quran is in the fatiha, and all that is in the fatiha is in bism Allah al-rahman al-rahim”; the other says: “All that is in bism Allah alrahman al-rahim is in the letter ba, which itself is contained in the point that is beneath it.”<sup>159</sup> The ba is seen to represent the first differentiation of the alif. It is its first articulated form with which the alif uniquely appears.<sup>160</sup> Thus the ba is taken to stand for the human presence, the Universal Man, that is, the outward mode of the divine presence. The ba, the Sufis teach, is nothing but man, the “first man,” who is “the spirit of being,” created in the image of God, the alif.<sup>161</sup>

As a horizontal extension, the ba graphs the shadow of the vertical alif standing before the radiating light of the point. As the shadow of the alif, the ba carries within it a visible trace of the original source, which is the point that appears beneath it. The point of ba becomes the shadow of the higher point that resides “in its hidden-treasurehood” before its first self-disclosure as an alif.<sup>162</sup> The transcendental point that lies above the alif descends to appear underneath the ba, just as divinity images itself in the human form. The Sufis see in this a reaffirmation of the universal realities and a clear illustration that the things of the lower worlds are manifestations of the things of the higher worlds. They refer to the prophetic tradition that says: “If you lower a rope unto the nethermost earth it would light upon God,” to show how the ba discloses the truth that underlies all things. They also refer to the verse that says that “everything

perishes but his Face,” to illustrate how the alphabetical symbol of the human presence at one veils and reveals in its form the unperishable face of divinity.

163 The point beneath the ba becomes the seal of divinity in the created world, a constant reminder of the origin (asl) whence everything proceeds.

Despite its veiled appearance in the ba the point remains essentially distinct from the letters, in the same way that Being, despite manifesting in all other beings, remains “nothing is as his likeness” (42:2). Al-Alawi writes:

“The point was in its principal state of utterly impenetrable secrecy where there is neither separation nor union, neither after nor before, neither breadth nor length, and all the letters were obliterate in its hidden Essence.”<sup>164</sup> And even though it reveals itself in the form of all the letters, the point remains above “all that is to be found in the letters by way of length and shortness and protuberance,”<sup>165</sup> and beyond the grasp of vision, aurality, or literacy.

#### The Soliloquy of the Ba

A Sufi tradition says that “by the ba Being manifests; and by the point the adoring is distinguished from the adored.”<sup>166</sup> In “al-Kahf wa al-Raqim,” al-Jili reflects on the spatial form of the ba, presenting a dialogue between the letter itself and the point that lies beneath it. The conversation reminds us of al-Nabulusi’s soliloquy, while presenting the doctrine of the Unity of Being in a geometrical guise. On the one hand, al-Jili’s soliloquy illustrates the meaning of the above Sufi tradition, and on the other, it expresses in a reflective, symbolic manner the bounding relationship between God and man, the divine and the human presence. He writes:

The point says to the ba: “O letter, I am your origin (asl) because you are composed from me. Yet, in your composite form, you are my origin, because every part of you is a point, so you are the whole (al-kull) while I am

the part (al-juz): the whole is the origin while the part is the branch (far).

In reality, however, I am the origin, because your composition is none other than me (ayn). Do not look at my appearance behind you and say: ‘This manifest thing is other than me,’ for I regard you to be none other than myself and my identity (huwiyya). And had I not existed in you I would not have had such a relationship to you. Until when will you turn your perception (shahada) away from me, leaving me behind your back? Make your hidden mysteries be your perception and your perception be your hidden mysteries by realizing my unity with you. Without you I would not have been the point of the ba, and without me you would not have been the ba with a point. How many symbols have I struck for you so that you may understand my unity with you, and know that your expansion (inbisat) in the world of the seen (alam al-shahada) and my concealment (istitar) in the world of the unseen (alam al-ghayb) are two modalities for our same essence. No one participates in my relationship to you, nor in your relationship to me. You are not ‘you,’ because your name is novel compared to mine. Can you not see how the first part of you is called ‘point,’ the second part is called ‘point,’ the third part is called ‘point,’ and so are the rest of your parts, point by point. I am you; you have no I-ness in yourself. Rather, my identity is your I-ness whereby you are what you are. Had you, when saying in yourself I, imagined my essence, I, too, would have, when saying he, imagined my face (wajh). Then, you would know that ‘I’ and ‘he’ are two expressions for one essence.”

The ba said: “O master, it has become certain to me that you are my origin, and I have realized that the branch and the origin are the same. This is my body extended and composed; I cannot exist except within it. I am a gross body

(jism kathif) bound to one place only whereas you are a subtle substance (jawhar latif) that can exist in everything. So how could I have the reality of yours? How could I be you? How would your conditions be the same as mine?" The point answered the ba and said: "perceiving your corporeality and imagining my spirituality is a form and a modality of mine. And since all the various letters and words, in their entirety, are none other than me, how could there be a distance? And even though the ten cannot be regarded as the name of the sum of these five units, where, in the reality of the ten, would the difference between the five and the ten be except in the name-ness (al-ismiyya)? You are, with all your aspects, being a modality and a glance of mine; where would the polarity between you and me be? and how? while I am not only the origin of this dialogue between you and me but also of all of that which comes out of you and me. All of this is none other than myself: an order of a divine wisdom. So if you want to conceive of me, imagine yourself, the letters, all of them, and the words, small and large, then say point, that totality is none other than myself, and myself is none other than that totality."167

#### The Formation of the Word

Describing the creation of Adam, the Quran reports: "So, when I have formed him (sawwaytahu) and have breathed into him of my spirit" (15:29). With reference to this verse, Ibn Arabi compares the formation of man to the formation of the word, that is, to the way in which letters are joined together to form meaningful, utterable words. A brief clarification of the nature of the Arabic is necessary here. Unlike the Latin-based alphabets, the Arabic alphabet does not contain, properly speaking, letters that are designated as vowels. The twentyeight letters of the Arabic alphabet are consonants and unutterable on their own.

The letters a, w, and y, which are usually referred to as "long vowels," are in

Arabic huruf al-illa, literally, “the letters of weakness,” of “deficiency,” or of “cause” (the philosophic expression al-illa al-ula means the “prime cause”).

There are countless words in Arabic in which these letters form no part; hence, they are not vowels in the literal sense of the word. Instead, there are six harakat, literally “motions,” marked on words in the form of diacritical notations that play the role of vowels in Arabic. They are not letters, however, nor do they form part of the alphabet. In a word such as DaRaBa, “to strike,” for example, the only letters that are written are those of the triliteral root D.R.B.; to put this same verb in a passive form DuRiBa, “is struck,” changes nothing in the word’s spelling. The only things that change are the unwritten “phonetic motions” (harakat), without which the root is unpronounceable, meaningless, or “dead,” so to speak. Utterance that causes a word to exist, to assume a presence, to be alive, is effected through the application of the harakat. The letter is unutterable if not mobilized by the vocalizing motions.

From this perspective, the consonant letters of the alphabet are viewed to constitute the word’s lifeless body whereas vowelizing to act as the animating spirit. It is from this perspective that Ibn Arabi compares the addition of the phonetic motions onto the letters, after their being prepared (taswiya) to receive these motions, to the formation of Adam as described in the above verse.

Through the agency of motions, Ibn Arabi says, the letters are brought forth in a new formation (nasha) called “word” (kalima), just as any individual of us is called “man” (insan) only after receiving the divine spirit.<sup>168</sup> This process also corresponds to the initial stage of the cosmogonic process, when the world is disengaged from the stillness of the primordial chaos, the state in which the possibilities of manifestation, still virtual, are lost in the indifferentiation of its materia. Ibn Arabi writes: “God first brought the entire world into existence in

the form of a well-prepared (musawwa), yet lifeless, ghost. It was like an unpolished mirror. But it is a rule in the divine business to prepare no place without it being able to receive a divine spirit, an act referred to as the ‘blowing of spirit into it.’ This is none other than the already prepared form reaching a state of readiness (istidad) to receive the incessant, radiating effusion (al-fayd) that has been and will always be.”<sup>169</sup>

The phonetic system of the Arabic language forms the basis of the Sufi notion of the formation of the word. The letters of the Arabic alphabet are seen to represent, insofar as they are all consonants, a homogeneous substratum that does not yet include any qualitative or differentiated imprint. The addition of the vocalizing motions (harakat) to the letters symbolizes the blowing of the spirit into this homogeneous substratum, an act that disengages the letters from the stillness of their primordial consonance, bringing them forth into the audible world of sound.

In grammatical terms, the six phonetic motions are divided into two correlated sets of three. One is harakat al-irab, literally, “motions of expression”; the other is harakat al-bina, literally, “motions of building.” They are correlated in the following order:

vowel irab bina literal meaning

A nasb fath “erecting,” “unfolding”

U raf damm “raising,” “embracing”

I khafd kasr “bringing down,” “breaking”

A consonant letter that is not subject to any of these phonetic motions is grammatically identified with sukun, “stillness.”<sup>170</sup> The pattern of formation constituted by the three phonetic motions—“unfolding” (fath), “raising” (raf), and “bringing down” (khafd), together with “stillness” (sukun) as the common center

whence these “motions” emanate—retraces the Sufis’ pattern of cosmic existence, spatial unfolding, and natural growth already discussed. Ibn Arabi says the fath signifies the unfolding of existence, raf signifies transcendence, and khafd signifies corporeality.<sup>171</sup> They correspond to the horizontal, rectilinear, and reversed movements respectively, revealing the three-dimensional cross, the pattern of triplicity. In the *Fihrist*, the tenth-century scholar and biographer Ibn al-Nadim quotes the ninth-century scholar Sahl b. Harun as saying: “Al-irab is made up of three motions (harakat)—al-raf, al-nasb, and al-khafd—because the natural movements are three: (1) movement from the center, like the movement of fire; (2) movement to the center, like the movement of earth (movement caused by gravity); and (3) movement about the center, like the movement of a sphere.”<sup>172</sup>

The act of adding these phonetic motions to the letters is called in Arabic “tashkil,” literally, “giving shape, morph or figure,” and “forming.” It derives from *shakl*, literally, “shape,” “morph,” and “figure.” Thus the act of transforming the consonant letters into pronounceable words connotes the idea of forming or shaping, giving, as it were, sonic-audible forms to the synthesis in the same way the human body receives its spatial-visual form when brought into existence. Ibn Arabi says: “Such is the way the world of words and utterances is formed from the world of letters. The letters are matter for words, just as water, earth, fire, and air are matter for the formation of our bodies.”<sup>173</sup> And just as nothing moves in the world except by the order of the immovable principle, so likewise in the world of letters, no phonetic motion may ever manifest except by the order of the principal stillness. “The promptings unto utterance,” Al-Alawi writes, “were set in motion according to the demands of the Point’s attributes which lay hidden in its Essence.”<sup>174</sup>

Fig. 2.15 Diagrammatic representation of the formation of the word  
in Arabic.

### The Tree of Being

Kun (Be!) was God's first uttered word, and kawn (the world) was the immediate outcome of this utterance. Ibn Arabi's treatise *Shajarat al-Kawn*

(The Tree of Being) is a fascinating exposition of his mystical reflections on the relationship between kun and kawn, the command and the outcome, the word and the world. Among the poetic imageries he constructs is the correspondence between the spatial structure of the human presence (the three-dimensional cross) and the "tree" of realities that grows from the "seed" of the divine word kun. In the *Tarifat*, a dictionary of Sufi terminology, al-Jurjani defines the term *shajara*, "tree," as "the Universal Man who governs the structure of the Universal Body." The Arabic term *shajara*, "tree," literally means "every plant that stands vertically with a trunk." It derives from *tashajur*, "fighting," "quarrel," and "opposition." Sufis identify the notion of the tree with that of the Universal Man because both embody the pattern of the three-dimensional cross, which expresses notions of both verticality and opposition. The trunk represents the vertical axis, and the branches represent the two horizontal axes.<sup>175</sup> The seed whence the tree grows corresponds to the center, the heart of Universal Man, which is the place where all complements are united and all opposites are reconciled. The Sufi master Abu Said al-Kharraz was once asked, "Whereby do you know God?" He replied, "By the fact that he is the *coincidentia oppositorum*."<sup>176</sup>

Kun is the imperative of kawn, which means "cosmos" or "universe," "the world of becoming"; kawn also means "coming into existence" and is "used as a noun for 'existence' as a whole, and so the 'universe' as containing all existing

things.”<sup>177</sup> Kun is the principle of takwin (formation), the divine order that can be interpreted as “become” or “come into existence.” So the Tree of Being is nothing other than the cosmic tree, and the seed whence it grows is the divine Essence. In Shajarat al-Kawn Ibn Arabi writes:

I have looked at the universe (kawn) and its design (takwin), at what was concealed (maknun) and its inscription, and I saw that the whole universe (kawn) was a tree, the root of whose light is from the seed ‘Be!’ (kun). The K of the creation (kawniyya) was fecundated by the seed of “We created you” (56:57), from which was formed the fruit of “We have created every thing by measure” (54:49) . . .

The first things to grow from this Tree, which is the seed of kun, were three shoots. One shoot thereof went to the right; this was “the fellows of the right hand” (56:27). Another shoot went to the left; this was “the fellows of the left hand” (56:41). And yet another shoot, well-balanced in shape, went straight up in a rectilinear way, from which were “the preceders,” “those who draw near” (56:11). As it became firm and high reaching, there came from its high and low branches the worlds of meaning and form. What came from the external bark and visible covers was the world of earthly kingdom. And what came from inner cores and concealed meanings was the world of heavenly kingdom. And what came from the sap that runs in its arteries and veins whereby its growth, living, and rising occur, its flowers blossom, and its fruits ripe, was the world of dominating power, which is the secret of the word kun.

Then God set a wall around the tree, determined its limits, and drew its forms. Its limits were the directions; they were up and down, right and left, before and behind. So what was highest was its upper limit, and what was

lowest was its lower limit. As for its forms they were the spheres, the planets, the angels, the rules, the effects, and the people. So he rendered the seven layers as the leaves sought for their shade, the shining planets as the flowers in the horizons, and the days and nights as two different garments: one was black worn to be veiled from sights, the other was white worn to appear unto those with insights . . .

When the trunk of this tree and its branches stood firm, its two limits met, as its end reached unto its beginning: “Unto your Lord is its termination” (79:44) to its initiation. For whatever begins with kun (Be!) it ends with yakun (will be). Thus no matter how many its branches are, and of how many kinds it may be, its origin is one, the seed of the word kun, and its end will be one, the word kun.<sup>178</sup>

### The Geometry of Being

In Insha al-Dwair (The Construction of Circles) Ibn Arabi provides a twodimensional diagram, geometrizing the basic structure of being. The diagram illustrates the relationship between the primordial, divine, and human presences, on which the presence of the word can also be mapped. The primordial presence is represented by the “whiteness,” the nondifferentiated background against which the diagram projects. The divine presence is represented by an all-encompassing circle, defining the outer limit of the circle of the human presence, which in turn defines the outer limit of the circle of the world.

Mediating between the divine presence and the world, the human presence translates the original unity into the fundamental quadrature of being.

From Ibn Arabi’s two-dimensional diagram of simultaneous unfolding we can reconstruct the process of universal manifestation in spatial terms. The spatial diagram illustrates the principles of centrality, axiality, circularity, triplicity,

and quadrature, synthesized in one diagram to represent symbolically the underlying order of being. This pattern spatialises the realities of the three manifest presences. Although the order of this pattern is revealed in each one of these manifest presences, specific aspects may be taken to represent each presence. Centrality and circularity, in that they reflect the order of unity and multiplicity, may be taken to designate the divine presence, whereas triplicity and quadrature, in that they reflect the three dimensions and the six directions, are taken to designate the human presence. As the creative instrument, the presence of the word mediates between the divine and the human presences by expressing the realities of both. All presences coincide in the central point, the expression par excellence of coincidentia oppositorum.

Fig. 2.16 The fundamental order of being according to Ibn Arabi (Insha al-Dawair).

Fig. 2.17 Diagrammatic representation of the geometry of being.

## Cosmic Order

### The Original Idea

In Uqlat al-Mustawfiz Ibn Arabi asks us to consider the situation of a person seeking shade and protection, who thought of the idea of a canopy. To build the canopy, however, he first had to prepare the ground and lay down the foundations. In seeking shade and protection, the foundations are the last thing to be thought of yet first to exist. The canopy, by contrast, is the first thing to occur in the mind but last to exist. This is the situation of the world, Ibn Arabi says. When God thought of revealing his “hidden treasures,” the first thing that occurred in his mind was the idea of humanity. To fulfill this idea, he first had to bring the entire world into existence to form the foundation for human existence. Although last in

existence, humanity was the original idea.<sup>1</sup> Humanity could not have existed without the world, just as the canopy cannot stand up without the foundations. And just as the foundation alone without the canopy is meaningless, for it provides neither shade nor protection, so likewise the world without humanity is purposeless, for it lacks the core being for whose purpose it was brought into existence.<sup>2</sup> The celebrated thirteenth-century Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi restates Ibn Arabi's idea in a poetic manner, drawing our attention to the fact that the outward appearance of things often conceals the inner reality. He writes:

Externally, the branch is the origin of the fruit; intrinsically the branch came into existence for the sake of the fruit.

Had there been no hope of the fruit, would the gardener have planted the tree? Therefore in reality the tree is borne of the fruit, though it appears to be produced by the tree.<sup>3</sup>

The Sufis along with most premodern Muslim thinkers advocate the view of a purpose-built cosmos designed by God for the accommodation of humankind. Man is at once the center, the model, and the ultimate aim of existence. The ontological correspondence between man and the cosmos was complex and multilayered. It was conceived and presented in a variety of ways in premodern Islamic sources, although the structural core concerning the three-dimensional cross was consistent. Texts such as, for example, the Ikhwan's Rasail, Ibn Tufail's, Hayy bin Yaqzan, Ibn Arabi's al-Tadbirat, and al-Jili's al-Insan al-Kamil, reveal rich and sophisticated conceptions underpinned by a firm belief in a universal order and structural resonance among the various levels of being. This was not peculiar to the Islamic tradition, of course. In fact the term cosmos, from Greek *kósmos*, denotes the idea of "order" and "ornament," meaning the universe as an ordered and ornamented whole. The Arabic equivalent, *kawn*, as

already discussed in the Tree of Being, designates the “cosmos” as an embodiment of the metaphysical order. “Cosmic formation” (takwin) refers to the materialization of the immutable essences (al-ayan al-thabita) in the form of the external essences (al-ayan al-kharijiyya), revealing the last three states in al-Hindi’s hierarchy: the world of spirits, the world of similitude, and the world of bodies. These worlds correspond to the three modes of cosmic existence: spiritual (jabarut), angelic (malakut), and human (nasut).

In the metaphysical order, the human presence was presented as mediating between God and the world. This is as far as the designative mode of creation (taqdir) is concerned. In the cosmic order, it is the cosmos that mediates between God and man, as far as the productive mode of creation (ijad) is concerned. The patterns of universal manifestation project into the realm of existence through the production of cosmic forms (al-suwar al-kawniyya).

Fig. 3.1

Acting as a link between God and man, the cosmos comprises the formal, imaginable, and communicable vocabularies, which constitute the alphabet of the language of symbolism. By means of this alphabet human imagination is able to function, as already discussed, and by means of the governing order one is able to retrace the geometry of existence according to which the world is fashioned.

In this chapter I will trace the order of divine realities discussed in the preceding chapters at the various levels of cosmic manifestation, focusing on the cosmograms presented in Ibn Arabi’s Futuhat. These cosmograms geometrize the cosmic structure at the spiritual, angelic, and human levels of being, revealing the main elements of cosmic landscape that embody the metaphysical order in many and varied forms.<sup>4</sup> Thus the analysis of cosmic order deals with these

various modes of embodiment, illustrating the way in which the formless, yet intelligible, relationships between the divine realities are translated into imaginable, spatio-temporal expressions. It demonstrates how all levels of cosmic hierarchy are gathered by the nizam, at once “order” and “thread,” of the divine realities that ties all manifestations together and everything back to their original source.

### Creative Breathing

The utterance of the creative order, Ibn Arabi says, coincides with both the exhalation of the divine Breath (al-nafas al-ilahi) or the Breath of the Compassionate (al-nafas al-rahmani) and the manifestation of the world.<sup>5</sup> Through the agency of the Breath the manifestation of the world becomes synonymous with the self-disclosure of the Absolute.<sup>6</sup> Self-disclosure, like creation, has two distinct phases: first, the essential Self-disclosure (al-tajalli al-dhati), wherein the Absolute manifests as immutable essences; and second, the sensuous Selfdisclosure (al-tajalli al-asmai), wherein the Absolute manifests as external essences.<sup>7</sup> As an inward act that occurs within the divine Self or Consciousness, the essential Self-disclosure does not project outwardly in an otherness differentiated from the sameness of the Essence. The immutable essences manifested by this determining act are nothing other than the names and attributes of the essence before externalization. Otherness occurs in the sensuous Selfdisclosure when these names take on forms, through God’s exhalation of “the first dense, transparent, luminous mass,” the “compassionate vapor” (al-bukhar al-rahmani), that is, the divine Breath.<sup>8</sup>

What is this compassionate vapor? And why did God exhale it? The realities of the world, Ibn Arabi explains, were within the Essence in a state of anxiety and distress (karab), crying out for externalization.<sup>9</sup> Bali Efendi, the sixteenthcentury Sufi, compares this to the holding of one’s breath within and the associated

“painful sensation of extreme compression” as the breath seeks an outlet.

Only when one breathes out does this compression cease. Similarly, Efendi says,

“the Absolute would feel the pain of compression if it did not bring into existence the world in response to the demand of the Names.”<sup>10</sup> This state of distress caused

“the sadness of the primordial solitude” that made God yearn to reveal himself:

“I was a hidden Treasure, I yearned to be known. That is why I produced creatures, in order to be known in them.”<sup>11</sup> To alleviate this distress (karab) God

breathed (tanaffas), and by breathing he externalized the inner realities, compassionately responding to their cry. The Breath of the Compassionate, as al-Qashani

puts it, brought out potential beings (al-mumkinat), which had they remained in nonexistence they would have caused the “distress of the Compassionate” (karab

al-rahman).<sup>12</sup> Thus the attribute of compassion characterizes the act of bringing into existence the forms of the world, and that is why the creative medium is

called the “Breath of the Compassionate” (al-nafas al-rahmani).<sup>13</sup>

Breathing involves a repetitive act of inhalation and exhalation. Sufis use this metaphor in their concept of perpetual ‘renewal of creation’ (tajdid al-khalq).

They say that by the inhalation and exhalation of the divine Breath all cosmic forms contained in the Breath are constantly manifested and reabsorbed, ceaselessly renewing the creation at every moment. The concept of the ‘divine Breath’ also forms the foundation for alphabetical symbolism, already discussed.

Al-Qashani says that as God attributes to himself the Breath, it is necessary to attribute to him also all of what the Breath involves, like breathing forth (tanfīs) and articulating the forms of the letters and words that, in this case, are the cosmic words (al-kalimat al-kawniyya).<sup>14</sup> Through the Breath meanings and letters, as spirits and forms, become fused together. The forms of the world receive the animating spirit from the Breath of the Compassionate in the same way

letters receive meanings the moment they are pronounced.<sup>15</sup>

Ibn Arabi asks those seeking to understand the nature of the divine Breath to consider the world. All is contained in the divine Breath like the day in the morning's dawn, he says, meaning that the world actualizes the forms potentially disseminated in the Breath, in the same way the day brings about all the events already ordained in its first moment, the dawn.<sup>16</sup> In philosophical terms, the divine Breath is the original medium through which potential beings were externalized, bursting out from the inwardness of formless potentiality into the outwardness of formal actuality. It is the "substance of the world" (jawhar al-alam), wherein are latent all the possibilities of formal manifestation.<sup>17</sup> The Breath equates the prime matter (al-hayula al-ula), which englobes all the forms of the world, representing, in the Ikhwan's terms, the transcendent substance of all divine artefacts.<sup>18</sup> The Breath is to the world what the intelligible point is to geometry and what the "ink" is to al-Ghazali's archetypal exemplar: the source wherein all possibilities are fused together as a nondifferentiated totality. It is to God what the whiteness of a blank sheet is to the architect: the unformed materia that is susceptible of receiving all kinds of forms. The divine Breath is at once the creative medium and the necessary substantial support for all creations.

### Breathing as Imagining

In response to the question "Where was our Lord before creating his creatures?" the Prophet is reported to have said: "in a ama with no air either above or below."<sup>19</sup> The Arabic term ama literally means "thin and subtle cloud." According to Ibn Arabi, it refers here to the divine Breath. The primordial "Cloud" is thus the first form the Breath took on externally and within which God then differentiated the forms of the world.<sup>20</sup> In the context of the geometrical and alphabetical symbolism, the Cloud can be seen as the cosmic equivalent of the circle and the

alif, that is, the first affirmatively conceived reality and the first qualified form of unity. It is the governing form within which the realities of the world are delivered from potency into actuality, from formlessness to formal existence. Ibn Arabi considers the Cloud to be the first existential condition (zarf) that supported God's external being (kaynunat al-haqq), while at the same time identifying it with absolute imagination (al-khayal al-mutlaq). The Cloud is identified with the divine imagination because it is viewed not only as a passive substance capable of receiving all forms but also as active agent that gives beings their forms.<sup>22</sup> It is thus the means whereby God projected forth the essences of potential beings as cosmic, imaginable forms, and the instrument whose function is to actualize the transcendental patterns of divine realities in the harmonized form of the cosmos.

By identifying the Cloud with absolute imagination Ibn Arabi presents divine breathing as an act of imagining. Unlike human imagining, he argues, divine imagining occurs from without and not from within the Essence. This is to say that God produced the world the moment he imagined it and not according to an eternally imagined model (mithal). And prior to their existence in the Cloud, the forms of the world did not exist as such in the divine Self, nor has God imagined them in his Mind prior to their production. As immutable essences, they were known as they are and as they would be when formally produced but not imagined.<sup>23</sup> The divine imagining of the forms of the world coincides with producing them through the Breath, hence the conflating of the divine acts of breathing and imagining.<sup>24</sup> Peculiar though it may sound, this conception is fundamental to Ibn Arabi's approach to resolve the perennial philosophical problem of the eternity (qidam) and newness (huduth) of the world. Through breathing-as-imagining Ibn Arabi attempts to reconcile the eternity of the world as immutable essences with the Islamic dogma of creatio

ex nihilo.<sup>25</sup>

To resolve this philosophical dilemma, Ibn Arabi begins by making a clear distinction between form (sura) and meaning (mana), imagining and knowing, as already discussed in chapter 1. Forms embody formless meanings, and as such they are accessible by human imagination. “The forms, insofar as they are forms,” he says, referring to the cosmic forms, “are the imaginable, and the Cloud, in which they are manifested, is the imagination.”<sup>26</sup> Thus viewed, Ibn Arabi’s forms are not permanent, Platonic models in whose likeness things are made but are rather the things themselves. There are pure, spiritual forms just as there are sensible, gross forms and intelligible, subtle forms. Together they constitute the cosmic forms that embody the formless immutable essences. In Ibn Arabi’s scheme of the creation, “cosmic” and “formal” are therefore synonymous terms. Meanings, on the other hand, are accessible by the intellect and can be known without necessarily being imagined. The original meanings are none other than the immutable essences.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, the imaginable forms that Ibn Arabi speaks of as existing in the Cloud or the detached imagination are different to the knowable immutable essences, which “have not smelt the fragrance of existence,” residing as they are in the divine Self.

The distinction between meaning and form, knowing and imagining, is consistent with Ibn Arabi’s conviction that knowledge is not the knower imagining the form of the known, as already discussed. He finds support for this in the divine name badi, “originator” or “innovator,” mentioned in a verse that speaks of “the originator (badi) of the heavens and the earth” (2:117).<sup>28</sup> This name derives from ibda, which means “to bring forth something original, novel, unprecedented,” and of which the term bida means “originality,” “novelty,” and “heresy.” Commenting on the above verse, Ibn Arabi says that the

creation of the heavens and the earth is associated with the name badi because they are created according to no preceding “model,” “likeness,” or “form” (mithal). Had the form of the cosmos been identical with the immutable essences in the nonexistence, God would not have been badi, for he would have been creating according to the form already present in his knowledge, and there would be no creatio ex nihilo.

God says: “The originator of the heavens and the earth” because they were created according to no preceding model. The first thing God created was the Intellect, that is, the Pen (al-qalam): it is the first original creature (maful ibda i) manifested from God-most transcendent. And every creature created without a preceding model (mithal) is original (mubda), and its creator is its originator (mubdi). So if knowledge is conceiving the form of the known, as some people maintain in the definition (hadd) of knowledge, that creature would not be original (mubda), because it has in the soul of the one who originated it a model, according to which he brought it into existence. To maintain this definition of knowledge would mean that that which is in God’s Self has never ceased to be necessary being (wajib al-wujud) and that God did not originate (ibtadaa) it in himself, as does the innovator (al-muhdith) when he originates, nor has anything been brought into existence but according to the form, which exists in the Self of the form giver (al-musawwir) for [the sake of things to be in] its likeness not for its own sake, for [God’s Self] is not the place of what he creates. It follows that God is not bad i (according to those who maintain that knowledge is the form of the known imprinted in the soul of the knower); but he is. So he has in his Self no form of what he originates, nor has he conceived of its form [before originating it]. This is a problematic matter. Among the knowable matters (ma lumat) there are things that can be formalized and others that cannot, though they are

knowable; hence, the definition of knowledge is not conceiving the form of the known. And so likewise is the one who knows; he could be amongst those who are able to conceive of forms, being endowed with the imagining faculty, and could be amongst those who know without being able to formalize, being incapable of giving form. Thus, [for God] form giving is an act that occurs from without (*min kharij*), and he does not receive within his Self what he forms (*sawwara*) from without, but he knows it. And know first that origination (*ibda*) is not possible except with forms (*suwar*) in particular, because they can be created and can, therefore, be originated. As for meanings (*maani*), none of them is originated (*mubtada*), because they cannot be created nor can they be originated, though they can be intellectualized as being essentially immutable.<sup>29</sup>

#### The “Cloud” and Cosmic Forms

Ibn Arabi’s elaboration on the nature of the forms contained in the Cloud adds further clarity both to the distinction he makes between form and meaning and to the relation he establishes between the primordial Cloud and the world of detached imagination. Commenting on the verse “Everything will perish save his Face (*wajhihi*)” (28:88), Ibn Arabi explains that his in “his face” (the pronominal suffix *hi* in *wajhi-hi*) can be understood as referring to the “thing” in “everything.” The verse would then read as “Everything will perish save its face.” Similarly, in the prophetic tradition “God created man in his Image (*suratihi*),” the same pronoun may also refer to “man,” meaning God created man in man’s own image. Understood in the alternative sense, Ibn Arabi considers the form of a thing to be its perishable aspect revealed in the Cloud, whereas its “face” to be its imperishable reality. He explains:

Then he caused to exist in the Cloud all the forms of the world, about which he said, “It will perish,” that is, in respect of its forms, “save its face,” that is,

in respect of its reality it will not perish. For the ha in wajhihi refers to the “thing.” So in relation to the forms of the world, “everything will perish,” but in relation to its realities, the world will not perish, nor is it possible to perish. If the form of man perishes, for example, and there remains no trace of it in existence, its reality, which is identified by, and is identical with, man’s definition (hadd), would not perish. We say that man is a “rational animal” (hayawan natiq), and we do not refer to his being existent or nonexistent, because this reality has never ceased to be his even if there were for him no form in existence.<sup>30</sup>

Within the primordial Cloud God unfolded the forms of the entire world, highest and lowest, subtle and dense, spatial and nonspatial. Ibn Arabi illustrates these forms in a series of diagrams, which show in a hierarchical order both the supra-natural and the natural worlds with all the cosmic levels they comprise. In the following I shall examine some of these diagrams in the same sequential manner Ibn Arabi follows, though he indicates that they should be seen as one diagram, in which the simultaneous existence of the elements would enable a better appreciation of their proper relationships.<sup>31</sup>

#### The World of Command

“To him belong the creation and the command” (7:54), the Quran says, introducing an important duality that underpinned premodern Islamic cosmology.

Muslim theologians interpreted the verse as referring to two distinct worlds:

the world of command (alam al-amr) and the world of creation (alam al-khalq).

This duality is consistent with the then prevailing Neoplatonic conception of the sensible and intelligible or physical and metaphysical division of reality. Ibn Arabi’s first diagram illustrates the metaphysical world of command.

32 Signifying authority and control, alam al-amr designates the realm

where the immutable laws governing all forms of worldly existence are set. In al-Hindi's hierarchy, it is the fourth state of Being, the world of spirits (alam al-arwah) that comprises the simple, cosmic models, in the likeness of which things are fashioned. It is the highest level in the hierarchy of cosmic manifestation, the level where God revealed his design of the world through the luminous traces the Pen inscribed upon the Tablet.

Ibn Arabi's rather curious diagram of the world of command shows the first stage of formal articulation within the primordial Cloud. It shows the Cloud in the form of an encompassing circle, the circumference of which is marked by the thirty stations of the angels ecstatic with love (maqamat almala'ika al-muhayyama). These encompass the quadrature of the Pen, the Preserved Tablet, Nature, and Matter, with each assuming distinct geometrical shape. The Pen is identified as the First Intellect (al-aql al-awwal), and the Preserved Tablet as the Universal Soul (al-nafs al-kulliyya). Within the Preserved Tablet two smaller circles are shown, representing the Soul's intellectual and practical faculties.<sup>33</sup> Next to the Preserved Tablet, the state of Nature (martabat al-tabia) is shown as a rectangle divided diametrically into four parts. In these divisions the four principles of Nature are arranged in two antinomical pairs: heat/cold and dryness/moistness. Next to the state of Nature, the Universal Matter (al-hayula al-kull) appears in the form of a circle analogous to the encompassing circle of the Cloud.<sup>34</sup>

Ibn Arabi's diagram re-presents the already-discussed quadrature of the Intellect, Soul, Nature, and Matter in a new way. Comparing this with the diagram discussed in the chapter on the divine presence helps understand the difference between the two modalities. At the divine level these elements were formless. The divine geometry emphasizes a particular configuration of

relationships and an inherent propagative order. It reveals the symmetrical relationships the first created quadrature bear to the original divine attributes and the governing patterns they inscribe. The cosmic geometry, by contrast, emphasizes their distinct forms, functions, and existential context. The Intellect, a formless reality at the divine level, assumes the form of an angel ecstatic with love at the cosmic level and becomes distinguished, unlike the rest of the angels in its class, by the unique capacity of intellectualizing both itself and its creator. The Soul also takes on the form of an angel ecstatic with love and becomes equipped with the theoretical and practical capacities. Nature, as a state, appears through its four generative forces. While Matter, the substance of the physical world, assumes a circular form specifically conditioned for spatial determinations.

Fig. 3.2 The form of the “Cloud” revealing the world of command according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt).

Ibn Arabi’s visualization of the world of command has its roots in the prevailing mythology and reported prophetic traditions. One tradition says: “God has a white earth in which the sun takes thirty days to cross the sky, and each of these days is thirty times longer than the days of the lower world. That earth is filled with creatures who do not know that God has been disobeyed in the earth or that He has created Adam and Iblis.”<sup>35</sup> This is the prophetic reference to the angel ecstatic with love, who, according to Ibn Arabi, are the first luminous bodies God created. Apart from the Soul, which was created through the agency of the Intellect, these luminous bodies were created without the agency of other beings. They are nonspatial bodies lying above the ruling of Nature. Being the most rarefied form of bodies, they define the universal boundary, the transitional zone, between the formal and the formless.

They form the circumference of the Cloud, the outer limit of the universe.

Created from the light of the divine Majesty these principal spirits are enraptured with God's beauty for they are exposed to nothing else.<sup>36</sup> Among them only the Intellect and the Soul are charged with responsibilities toward the created world.<sup>37</sup>

The metaphysical order underpins the various embodiments that take place at this cosmic level as revealed in the triangle of the Intellect, the rectangle of the Soul, the divided square of Nature, and the circle of Matter. Ibn Arabi does not explain the logic of this diagram's asymmetrical composition. Despite the overall circular form, there seems to be a sense of vertical hierarchy in the composition, suggesting a vertical reading of the diagram. The pointedness of the Pen above the Tablet establishes their ranking, while their connection with the physical world, that is to unfold with the Universal Matter, is mediated by the state of Nature. Circularity, as an expression of unity, totality, and firstness, appears in the form of both the Cloud and Universal Matter. The form of the Cloud, as the cosmic expression of the first qualified form of unity, is mirrored in the form of Universal Matter. But whereas the circle of the Cloud encompasses both the metaphysical and the physical, the Universal Matter is specially conditioned for physical manifestations.

Ibn Arabi differentiates two levels of Nature: grand and limited.

"Nature," he says, "is the most deserving relation to be identified with the Real because everything else was manifested by it."<sup>38</sup> It is the Breath that pervades the world, ruling over all forms including the Intellect. Here Ibn Arabi is referring to the grand Nature (*al-tabia al-uzma*) that is inherent within God's creative medium, the Breath.<sup>39</sup> The two levels of Nature are similar, however, in the way that a mother and a daughter are capable of maternity

and progenitive production. The state of Nature shown in the above diagram is the “daughter” of the grand Nature.<sup>40</sup> As Nature has no essence, however, it is traced through the substance within which it reveals its effects. The grand Nature is, therefore, identified with the Cloud, and the “daughter” with the Universal Matter.<sup>41</sup> The Cloud, the first luminous mass, is the primal foundation of all, whereas Universal Matter, also *al-haba*, is the substance of the spatio-temporal world. *Al-haba*, the Jurjani’s *Tarifat* says, is “the very substance in which God unfolded the bodies of the world.”<sup>42</sup> Thus understood, *al-haba* is not a prime substance in the sense of pure potency, but rather a relative or secondary substance that is determined in accordance with the special demands of the spatio-temporal conditions of existence.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, Universal Matter corresponds to *materia secunda* in the scholastic philosophy, whereas *materia prima* equates Ibn Arabi’s *ama* and the Ikhwan’s Original Matter.<sup>44</sup>

Structured upon quadrature, the state of Nature mediates between the exemplar set in the Tablet and its embodiment in the Universal Matter. Yet Nature, as Ibn Arabi explains, has no inherent knowledge of its own, nor has the instrument of acquiring knowledge. As an active force, it acts under the directives of the Soul, and quadrature is the underlying structure of its *modus operandi*. Although it functions by means of the four generative principles, only two of these are active. This is because it is subject to the Soul’s determination, Ibn Arabi explains, and the Soul has only two faculties: the theoretical and the practical. So Nature’s two active instruments come from the Soul’s inherent dual structure. They work together: the Soul provides knowledge, and Nature acts. This reflects the understanding that the natural laws governing worldly existence alone cannot explain the reality of things.

The laws of nature constitute the object of the science of causes (ilm al-asbab), whereas the inner meanings can only be accessed through the science of realities (ilm al-haqaiq).

Nature's two active principles are heat and cold. Heat causes dryness, and cold causes moistness. Dryness and moistness are thus passive outcomes in relation to heat and cold. They are also in opposition just as are heat and cold.<sup>45</sup>

Heat negates cold, and dryness negates moistness; hence they cannot naturally mix. Their contrasting qualities, however, enable a particular pattern of productive synthesis, wherein quadrature remains the underlying order. Active and passive forces of Nature join in four possible combinations only, producing the four natural elements: fire, air, earth, and water.<sup>46</sup>

Heat Cold

Dryness Moistness Dryness Moistness

Fire Air Earth Water

The active-passive interaction applies to the Pen and the Tablet as well, as both are subject to the ruling of the grand Nature. The Pen represents the essential, active pole of manifestation, and the Tablet represents the substantial, passive pole.

The Pen, as the “cosmic refraction” of the primordial word,<sup>47</sup> embodies the triplicity of the creative command “Be!”; whereas the Tablet, as the cosmic book, actualizes the command, materializing the quadrature of the arkan—fire, air, water, and earth. The Pen corresponds to the productive triplicity of formation, whereas the Tablet corresponds to the designative quadrature of proliferation. A reported prophetic tradition says that the first thing God created was the Pen, whose length equaled the distance between heaven and the earth. He then created the Tablet, whose length extended between heaven and earth, and its width stretched from east to west.<sup>48</sup> The Pen, thus viewed, signifies axiality, corresponding to human

spirituality and unique upwardness, to the verticality of the alif, to the trunk of the Tree of Being, and to the vertical axis of the three-dimensional cross. The Tablet signifies the principle of horizontality, corresponding to the human corporeality, to the letter ba, to the branches of the Tree of Being, and to the two horizontal axes of the cross. The Tablet also corresponds to the circle, reflecting the divine presence, and the Pen corresponds to the point, reflecting the Essence. Just as the Essence, under the “pressure” of the realities, exhaled the Breath, manifesting the forms of the world, the mother point, wanting to reveal its hidden treasures, gave birth to the multitude of potential beings, and the seed of “Be!” after fecundation generated the cosmic tree, so likewise the Pen, after looking toward God with “a look of reverential fear (hayba),”<sup>49</sup> burst open, the ink (midad) of existence flowed, and the exemplar of the world was transcribed.

#### The World of Creation

Zooming in on the circle of Universal Matter, we cross the threshold from the world of command (alam al-amr) into the world of creation (alam al-khalq), from the metaphysical to the physical. As an imaginary substance specially conditioned for physical manifestations, Universal Matter is an intelligible reality, or an agency, with no essence (maqul ghayr mawjud al-wujud al-ayni).<sup>50</sup> It is recognizable through the forms that unfold within it. These are the world of creation represented by the main cosmic features: the divine Throne, the Footstool, the celestial Gardens, the heavens and the earths. These cosmic forms are subject to the governing effects of Nature and are therefore distinguished from the supra-natural world that lies above them.<sup>51</sup>

#### The Throne and the Footstool

The natural world in Ibn Arabi’s scheme is the world of synthesis, and the Throne is the first composite form that marks the threshold into the domain of

complex cosmic entities.<sup>52</sup> But composition is not in the material sense yet, for the Throne and the Footstool are not literally spatial entities. Synthesis refers here to the mediating realities involved in their production. The Throne is considered to be a composite form because its production involves four realities: Nature, Universal Matter, Universal Body, and Circularity. God first brought Universal Matter into being, which was then transformed into the Universal Body upon receiving the spatial qualities of length, breadth, and depth. Nature then conditioned this Body by governing its possibilities. Circularity was the first form this Body received, so there was the sphere (falak). God called this sphere the “Throne” and as the all-Compassionate he rested upon it.

Fig. 3.3 The divine Throne and the Footstool according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhat).

The Quran describes the Throne as the divine seat, “The all-Compassionate sat himself upon the Throne” (20:5), and his Footstool (kursi) as “encompassing the heavens and the earth” (2:255). It also refers to the bearers carrying the Throne and the angels surrounding it. Arsh, “throne,” has two related meanings: the “kingdom” over which a king reigns and the “seat” (sarir) upon which he sits. The Throne was accordingly seen as the whole physical world as well as the cosmic seat upon which God rests. Citing Ibn Masarra, Ibn Arabi says that the lifted Throne (al-arsh al-mahmul) is none other than the divine kingdom (almulk).

<sup>53</sup> The bearers can thus be interpreted as the basic structure and governing laws of the kingdom as well as the pillars that support the Throne.<sup>54</sup> As for the angels, Ibn Arabi explains that God created them from the lights of the Throne, which is described in a tradition as being created from divine Light. From these angels God selected four bearers to carry the pillars of the Throne.<sup>55</sup> As the threshold into the physical world, the Throne and the Footstool define a transitory domain that is neither spatial nor nonspatial. Ibn Arabi attributes

to the Throne sensible, spatial characteristics, describing it as “a seat with four corners and four faces.” Although the four corners are the “original pillars,” they are not the sole supports of the Throne. “In each of the Throne’s four faces,” Ibn Arabi adds, “there are many pillars equally distributed.” The Throne is also made hollow to contain the physical world.<sup>56</sup> With reference to the verse, “The angels and the spirit ascend unto him in a day whereof the span is fifty thousand years” (70:4), Ibn Kathir says, “The distance between the Throne and the seventh earth is fifty thousand years of travel, and its breadth is fifty thousand years.”<sup>57</sup> But despite these spatial characteristics, Ibn Arabi warns, the Throne is not spatial in the literal sense. To take the spatial characteristic literally, he says, one would face the difficult task of explaining in spatial terms the modes of divine “sitting” upon it and the angels “encircling” it. “If you say that there is, for the angels who are encircling the Throne, no space to move within, since the Throne has occupied the entire vacuum,” Ibn Arabi explains, “we say, there is no difference between them encircling the Throne and God resting upon it. For that which does not admit spatiality does not admit conjunction and separation.”<sup>58</sup> The same applies to the Footstool, which shares with the Throne its subtle modality, for just “as the Compassionate rests upon the Throne, the Feet rest upon the Footstool.”<sup>59</sup> By virtue of its subtle, intermediary nature, the domain of the Throne and the Footstool combines the spiritual and physical characteristics of its neighboring domains.

The forms of the Throne and the Footstool crystallize the pattern of quadrature.

The four bearers of the Throne correspond to the four creative attributes—Life, Knowledge, Will, and Power—that support the divine presence. Many traditions say that God created the Throne from green emerald and its four pillars from red ruby.<sup>60</sup> The bearers of the Throne are also depicted as four angels whose

feet are in the nethermost earth and whose heads are in the Throne. These four bearers have the forms of a man, a bull, an eagle, and a lion.<sup>61</sup> Four celestial rivers are also described as being laid out about the Throne: a river of sparkling light, a river of blazing fire, a river of shining white snow, and a river of water.<sup>62</sup>

The bearers of the Throne, Ibn Arabi explains, are the governors responsible for the management of the natural world. They are four pairs of archangels and companion prophets. The angels are Seraphiel (Israphil), Gabriel (Jibrail), Michael (Mikhail), and Rudwan, and the prophets are Adam, Muhammad, Abraham, and Malik.<sup>63</sup> Each of the four pairs is responsible for one core matter: form (sura), spirit (ruh), nourishment (ghidha), and status (martaba). Seraphiel and Adam are responsible for forms, Gabriel and Muhammad for spirits, Michael and Abraham for nourishment (arzaq), and Malik and Rudwan for status.

Each pair of the Throne's supporters constitutes as it were two complementary aspects: hidden and manifest, spiritual and sensible. This is reflected in the elements they support. Ibn Arabi explains that forms are of two kinds: luminous like those of the "angels ecstatic with love," and sensible like those in the natural world (including imaginary forms); spirits are divided into those associated with luminous forms and those with sensible forms; nourishment is also divided into sensible, such as food, and spiritual, such as sciences and knowledge; and the status of every being is polarized into happiness and suffering, which have many sensible and spiritual forms in this world and in the hereafter.

Fig. 3.4 The bearers of the divine Throne according to Ibn Arabi.

Although quadrangular in form, Ibn Arabi says, the Throne has eight pillars. The other four pillars, for which there are no bearers in this world, mark the middle of each of the Throne's four faces. On the day of the resurrection God will appoint those who shall bear the throne from these pillars, as alluded

to in the following verse: “And eight will uphold the Throne of their Lord that day” (69:17).<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, the quadrangular structure of the Throne is tied to the structure of the “first formation” (al-nasha al-ula), supporting existence in the present world. In the “other formation” (al-nasha al-ukhra), when the world will be recreated afresh, the Throne will become octagonal as the new four supporters will assume their responsibilities.<sup>65</sup> In this formal transformation the very structure of the Throne will not change, only four new bearers will join the original four. Ibn Arabi illustrates geometrically the structure of the divine Throne in the other formation by way of two superimposed squares, a form that reveals at once the original quadrature of the first formation as well as the octagonal structure of the other formation.

“Inside the Throne,” Ibn Arabi says, “God created the Footstool (al-kursi), square in form, and let his Feet to hang down onto it.”<sup>66</sup> Al-kursi, the cosmic container of the heavens and the earth, is seen as the support of the divine Feet.

Fig. 3.5 The form of the Throne in the hereafter according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt).

It is quadrangular in form, sharing with the Throne similar features. A tradition says: “Those who bear the Footstool are four angels, each of whom has four faces; their feet are in the Rock below the seventh, nethermost earth.”<sup>67</sup> Ibn Arabi confirms that the Footstool resembles the Throne, but only with regard to its quadrature, not its pillars. The main difference lies in that the Footstool identifies the level at which the first bifurcation of unity occurs symbolized by the Feet (al-qadamayn). As the Feet hang down onto the Footstool, Ibn Arabi explains, “the divine word, which was one on the Throne, is divided.”<sup>68</sup> The divine compassion, one at the Throne of the all-Compassionate, splits at the Footstool into compassion (rahma), symbolized by one foot, and wrath mixed with

compassion (ghadab mashub bi-rahma), symbolized by the other. At the level of the Footstool, the absolute compassion of the Throne becomes relative by associating it with wrath, its opposite. Thus the divine Feet signify the first polarization of unity, the model for all binary oppositions, which fall under either commandment (amr) and prohibition (nahi) or affirmation (ithbat) and negation (nafi). These binaries govern the physical world. They are the cosmic referents of God's antinomical names and attributes, which are in turn the referents for all opposites in the world, whose spatial expression par excellence are the six arms of the three-dimensional cross projecting from a common center into opposite directions.

The Throne is associated with two ideas: the idea of light (nur) and the idea of spirit (ruh). The spirit, "most often figured as a 'center', a 'ray', a 'descent', a 'presence' or 'immanence'," is thought of as residing at the center of the Throne. As the sphere of spheres, the outermost, all-encompassing limit of our world, the Throne forms the "circumference" (muhit) of the body of the world. Signifying totality and integration, the Throne identifies a universal domain of which spirit is the center and light is the matter.<sup>69</sup> Thus viewed, the Throne embodies the principle of circularity, reflecting the pattern of the divine presence, wherein the Essence corresponds to the central spirit, and the names correspond to the encompassing circumference.<sup>70</sup> The process through which the undifferentiated divine Light becomes differentiated by taking on the form of the Throne simulates the process through which the undetermined Essence becomes determined by descending into the state of the first determination. And just as the process of the essential determination continues to distinctively reveal the divine names and to designate the creative quadrature of Life, Knowledge, Will, and Power, so likewise the process

of differentiation of the divine Light continues to manifest the angels, who encircle the Throne, from the lights of the Throne (anwar al-arsh), and to designate the supportive quadrature, who are entrusted with the task of carrying the Throne.

Combined with the vertical ray of the spirit, which stands at its center, the quadrature of the Throne constitutes the three-dimensional cross, the pattern of the human presence. The spirit is represented by a vertical ray since it is “the affirmation of Unity in all the degrees of universal Existence,” the vertical link that ties all beings to their originator.<sup>71</sup> Numerically, the octagonal order of the Throne corresponds to the number 8, the order of the divine presence: the Essence and the seven principal names—Living, Knowing, Willing, Powerful, Speaking, Hearing, and Seeing. Eight is seen as the first cubical number, which, as previously discussed, corresponds to the three dimensions of length, breadth, and depth. Hence the octad of the Throne also corresponds to the triplicity of the human presence. The triplicity of the three dimensions is the pattern by means of which Universal Matter becomes the Absolute Body, which then receives the forms of the Throne and the Footstool.

#### The Celestial Gardens

Within the realm of the Throne and Footstool, Ibn Arabi locates the celestial Gardens (al-jinan, singular janna), the faithfuls’ promised abode of eternal happiness. Premodern Islamic sources reveal an interesting debate concerning whether the Gardens are already created or are part of God’s scheme of the second creation. The point of the debate is why God would create something useless that he will have to destroy and recreate again at the time of resurrection. Ibn Arabi articulates a sophisticated view with regard to this debate, arguing for the existence of hierarchically structured Gardens located in a cosmic domain

that will not be subject to destruction and recreation. This domain is bounded by two spheres that God created within the Footstool: the sphere without stars (atlas), its upper limit, and the sphere with fixed stars (falak al-kawakib althabita), its lower limit. The convex surface of the latter sphere forms at once the ground of the Gardens and the upper limit of the planetary skies, the domain that will be consumed by the fire of Hell in the hereafter.

The atlas sphere is a “circular, transparent body” that God divided into twelve sections, buruj, as alluded to in the following verse: “By the heaven, holding mansions of the stars (buruj)” (85:1).<sup>72</sup> It is the sphere of the constellations.

The Arabic term atlas means “effaced” or “obliterated,” denoting the idea of perfect homogeneity without any distinguishable features. The atlas sphere thus forms the homogeneous background onto which the configurations and movements of the planets and the stars are projected. In “The Anatomy of Spheres,” the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century astronomer Baha al-Din al-Amili considers the atlas sphere and the sphere of the fixed stars to be the scientific terms for the Throne and the Footstool respectively.<sup>73</sup> This might have been so, but as we will see, this does not work with Ibn Arabi’s cosmological structure, wherein the Throne and the Footstool are necessarily motionless instruments for the determination of different modalities and durations of time.

Ibn Arabi’s paradisaical domain consists of eight Gardens, seven of which are hierarchically ordered in seven levels, and an eighth superior one, al-Wasila, cutting across all the levels assigned to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>74</sup> The seven Gardens, in a descending order, are Adan, al-Firdaws, al-Naim, al-Mawa, al-Khuld, Dar al-Salam, and Dar al-Maqama. The names derive from various Quranic verses, and the structure reflects the order of the divine presence: the seven Gardens correspond to the seven principal names, and al-

Wasila represents the Essence. As the Essence supports all the names, al-Wasila prevails in all the Gardens. The Quran makes numerous references to the Gardens, which Ibn Arabi interprets in a layered way.

Fig. 3.6 The celestial Gardens according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt).

In addition to the eight-level order, Ibn Arabi distinguishes three types of Gardens: Gardens of the Elites (jannat al-ikhtisas), Gardens of Inheritance (jannat al-mirath), and Gardens of Deeds (jannat al-amal). The first and highest in order refers to the verse: “But God chooses (yakhtass) for his mercy whom he will” (2:105). The second refers to “Such is the Garden which we cause the devout among our bondmen to inherit” (19:63). The third refers to “Give good tidings unto those who believe and do good deeds, that theirs are Gardens underneath which rivers flow” (2:25). In this hierarchy Ibn Arabi focuses on what makes people worthy of being chosen, of inheriting and of inhabiting the Gardens. With reference to the repeated imagery of the “Gardens underneath which rivers flow” (85:11), he further elaborates his layout, saying that in every type of Garden God laid out four rivers, so there are twelve rivers in accordance with the order of the astrological signs.<sup>75</sup>

The four rivers represent the main sources of esoteric knowledge.<sup>76</sup> They include a river of unchanging Water (ma ghayr asin) representing the science of life (ilm al-hayat); a river of Wine (khamr) representing the science of the spiritual states (ilm al-ahwal); a river of Honey (asal) representing the science of the divine revelation (ilm al-wahi) with its many kinds; and a river of Milk (laban) representing the science of secrets (ilm al-asrar), the kernel of all sciences that God directly reveals to those who devote themselves utterly to him.<sup>77</sup>

Tied directly to the tripartite structure of the human formation (al-nasha alinsaniyya)—sensible, spiritual, and imaginary—the fourfold pattern of sciences

generates twelve different types of knowledge in accordance with the duodenary structure of the zodiac. Ibn Arabi explains:

These are four sciences, while man's formation is threefold: an inward, ideal, spiritual formation; an outward, sensible, natural formation; and an intermediary, isthmian-bodily, imaginal formation. Through each formation man has a distinct share in each of the four rivers, with each share having an independent river, the taste of which differs according to the formation. What man perceives of a river by the senses is other than what he conceives of it by imagination, and what he conceives by imagination is other than the meaning he intellectualizes. This is the order of every formation. So for man there are twelve rivers: four in the Garden of the Elites, four in the Garden of Inheritance, and four in the Garden of Deeds.<sup>78</sup> Three, 4, and 12 are the numbers that underlie the order of the paradisaical domain. They derive from the duodenary structure of the atlas sphere, the ruling element. Although the divisions of the atlas sphere are twelve, Ibn Arabi explains, they are of four different natures: aqueous, terrestrial, aerial, and igneous.

The quadrature derives from the four pillars of the Throne. Nature rules over all modalities of being in the world of creation, including that of the Gardens, through the agency of the atlas sphere. Ibn Arabi identifies three modalities of being, *manazil* (dwellings)—the present world (*dunya*), the intermediary world (*barzakh*, of the dead awaiting the second creation), and the future world (*akhira*)—with each having distinct existential conditions. Different though they may be, these three worlds are nevertheless subject to the ruling of Nature, with each requiring four distinct signs to mediate the natural processes in ways unique to its modality of being; hence, the twelve signs of the constellation (*buruj*).<sup>79</sup> The triple repetition of the quadrature results in the signs that are related by the triangle being of the same nature and tendency, whereas the signs

that are related by the square being of different nature and tendency.

Fig. 3.7 The duodenary structure of the atlas sphere according to Ibn Arabi.

Since the atlas sphere is a composed cosmic entity, Ibn Arabi says, Nature rules over it through the elements, fire, air, water, and earth, and not through the simple tendencies of heat, cold, dryness, and moistness. Thus Nature differentiates the signs into Igneous (hot and dry), Aerial (hot and wet), Aqueous (dry and wet), and Terrestrial (cold and dry). In their turn, the signs generate in the corporeal domain the spheres of the natural elements (fire, air, water, and earth) whereby generation and corruption occur. Their generative pattern is structured in the following order:

1. Igneous: Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius are the generators of the sphere of fire.
2. Aerial: Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius are the generators of the sphere of air.
3. Aqueous: Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces are the generators of the sphere of water.
4. Terrestrial: Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn are the generators of the sphere of earth.

The structure of the atlas sphere corresponds to the higher cosmic forms within which it is contained, while determining the structure of the Gardens which itself contains. The divine order of universal manifestation projects once more into the domain of the celestial Gardens, manifesting itself in a new cosmic modality. Quadrature is revealed in the fourfold division of the atlas sphere, in the four natural elements generated by the zodiac, and in the four rivers of esoteric knowledge. Triplicity is revealed in the threefold division of the atlas sphere, in the three modalities of being, and in the three levels of Gardens. The duodenary pattern of the sphere of the constellations is yet another cosmic manifestation of the original productive marriage of triplicity and quadrature. Centrality and axiality, however, are revealed in the tree of tuba, which stands at the center of the Gardens. The tree represents Universal Man, designating,

as it were, his place in the Gardens. It relates to the rest of the trees in the Gardens as Adam relates to humankind. God planted it with his own hand in the same way he created Adam. He also breathed the spirit into it, rendering it the most splendid of all trees. It rises above the fence of the Garden of Eden, where God planted it, and its branches spread over other Gardens. Its roots are in the soil of our world and its fruits in paradise.

#### Heaven and Earth

Within the sphere of the fixed stars, the ground of the Gardens, God unfolded the heavens and the earths, the world of space and time as we know it. Ibn Arabi's diagram of this world shows the sphere of the fixed stars with the twenty-eight mansions of the moon (manazil al-qamar (36:38)), the seven domes of the heavens resting upon their respective layers of the earths (alardun), the four kingdoms, and the Universal Man. At the center of the diagram a vertical line, identified as *amad* (pillars), is shown, representing the invisible cosmic pillars that hold up the vaults of heaven. Heaven and earth is the last and innermost world in the hierarchy of cosmic manifestation. It is the sensible world of corporeal bodies. The size of this world in relation to the Footstool, a reported tradition says, is as a ring thrown in a desert. Another describes the suspension of heaven and earth in the middle of the Footstool as the suspension of Footstool is in the middle of the Throne, like a lamp hanging down from the sky. In al-Hindi's hierarchy, heaven and earth is the World of Bodies (*alam alajsam*), the sixth state of dense, composed, cosmic entities that is susceptible of division, portioning, separation, and conjunction. It is the necessary foundation for man to whom al-Hindi designates the seventh and final state of Being.

Fig. 3.8 The heavens, the earths, the kingdoms, and Universal Man as invisible support according to Ibn Arabi (*Futuhāt*).

The form and the structure of the corporeal world are elaborated in many Quranic references, prophetic sayings, and rich folkloric tradition. According to the Quran, “God it is who has created seven heavens, and of the earth the like thereof” (65:12). Upon the flat expanse of the earths, the Prophet is reported to have said, the skies are constructed “like a dome,” an image that seems to derive from the immediate spatial experience.<sup>80</sup> The Quranic descriptions of heaven and earth tend to support such interpretation: “Who has appointed the earth a resting-place (firash) for you, and the sky a canopy (bina)” (2:22). Firash, from farasha, literally “to extend,” “to spread out,” and “to furnish,” gives the meaning of furnishing the earth by spreading it out in order to accommodate human existence. Bina, from bana, “to build,” “to construct,” is often interpreted as “a roof upon the earth in the form of a dome.”<sup>81</sup> The Prophet, further elaborating this image, is reported to have said that God created the earths (al-ardun) flat, seven in number, laid successively one below the other, and each being smaller than the one below it. The seven skies (al-samawat), similarly laid one above the other, are domical in shape, and each is smaller than the one above it. Each sky rests on the extremities of its respective layer of earth, thus forming a series of domes placed within each other and separated by a distance of five hundred years of travel. Ibn Arabi reproduces these descriptions in a graphic form, illustrating the way in which medieval Muslims conceived of the cosmic structure of heavens and earths. Commenting on his diagram, Ibn Arabi reiterates the Prophet’s descriptions: “God made the seven skies resting upon earth like domes. Upon each earth, which is spread out like a carpet, a sky like a hemisphere rests on its ends. God spread out the earth so that the sky could stand upon it.”<sup>82</sup>

Early Islamic narratives describe the earth as being spread out on the back

of a fish, a whale (hut) called “nun” (literally “N”), whose ends touch the extremities of the sky.<sup>83</sup> The meaning of this description may be understood with reference to the symbolism of the Arabic letter nun. Geometrically, the letter nun is written as half a circle with a diacritical point representing its center. Originally, Ibn Arabi says, the nun was a complete circle, representing the spherical form of the world. But since the world is divided into two equivalent halves—the sensible and the intelligible—the letter nun is likewise divided into two corresponding halves—inscribed and implied or visible and invisible. The analogy is inverted as a mirror image, however. The inscribed lower half of the nun represents the visible upper part of the world, whereas the implied upper half of the nun represents the invisible lower part of the world.

Fig. 3.9 The formal correspondence between the letter nun (N) and the world according to Ibn Arabi.

The directional differentiation of lower and upper has an experiential as well as a symbolic reference. Experientially, standing on the flat expanse of the earth under the hemispherical dome of the sky the invisible half of the sphere is always below us. Symbolically, however, we normally refer to the invisible world of higher realities, the world of the unseen, in contrast to the lower visible world of shadows, the world of the seen. The inversion here reminds us of the way in which the manifest triplicity and hidden quadrature projects through syllogistical reasoning into the sensible world in an inverse manner—hidden triplicity and manifest quadrature.<sup>84</sup> Acting as a mirror, the letter nun depicts the form of heaven and earth in an inverse manner. The spreading out of the earth on the back of nun, the fish, whose ends touch the ends of the sky, may then be seen as an extension of the flat layers of earth between the two ends of the letter nun. The earth thus becomes the diameter of the circle of nun, the

center of which is the original rock.<sup>85</sup>

Early cosmological narratives describe a central rock (sakhra), upon which the fish rests, as standing below the lowest earth. This rock is thought of as the foundation upon which the bearers of the Throne stand. A tradition says: “The rock which is beneath the earth is the end of the created world; upon its borders there are four angels, whose heads are below the Throne.”<sup>86</sup> At one time, the narrative says, the fish moved so the earth swayed and became unstable and uninhabitable.

In order to stabilize it, God “cast into the earth firm mountains (rawasi)” (31:10), the largest of which is mount qaf (literally, “Q”), which is described as encompassing the earth, as the perimeter to which the sky adheres, and as the source from which the vault of heaven derives its green color. It is also described as being connected to the rock by means of veins or roots that hold the whole earth firm. When God wants to quake a spot on earth he simply moves the root to which this spot is attached.<sup>87</sup>

In Uqlat al-Mustawfiz, Ibn Arabi describes the process of creating the lower world (al-dunya, from dana, to “draw nearer,” as opposed to al-akhira, the “future world,” from akhkhara, “to delay”). After creating the Intellect, the Soul, the Throne, the Footstool, the atlas sphere, and the sphere of the fixed stars, he says, the divine gaze (al-nazar) and willed orientation (al-tawajjuh aliradi) were directed toward the creation of the sensible world. First, God ordered an angel to descend in the depth of the space to its innermost point to form the center. This center was to the world what the sacrum (ajb al-dhanab) was to the animal body: the birthplace and the foundation of its formation. “It is the part that does not decompose (la yabla),” Ibn Arabi adds, “the place of attention of the supreme element (al-unsur al-azam), from whose brief attention (ilti fata) the Intellect is created.” As directed, the angel descended to the

center of the world and positioned the rock, reaffirming the divine order of things wherein the center is always the source from which things proceed forth and to which they will eventually return. The angel rotated the earth's sphere, making "that which surrounds the center an immense spherical rock, and in the center of that rock the angel placed an animal with a green leaf in its mouth."<sup>88</sup> This view introduces an interesting shift in the creative process. Up to this stage, God followed a linear descending order. After creating the sphere of the fixed stars, however, God changed procedure by first founding the central rock and then unfolding the heavens and earths in an ascending order. Contrary to what many ancient philosophers had believed, Ibn Arabi argues, the first thing laid in the corporeal world was the center, around which the skies were then constructed. The earth, as a center, was first laid out and then the skies were formed following the three-dimensional structure of the human formation.<sup>89</sup> The rock formed the "sacrum" of the world's structure, the focal point whence the body of the world unfolded in the six directions—front and back, left and right, up and down—materializing the spatial structure of the human presence. Ibn Arabi's view of the creation and structure of the corporeal world can be traced in the writings of various scholars. For example, al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144) writes: "The creation of the substance of the earth is anterior to the creation of heaven; but the spreading out of the earth is posterior to it."<sup>90</sup> Al-Diyarbakri (d. 1582) presents a similar view: "When God began to create things, He created the turbah before heaven; when He had created the heavens and divided them into seven stages, He spread out the earth."<sup>91</sup> A popular tradition also relates that "Allah created a jawharah, a substance; thereupon he contemplated it with a majestic gaze, so that it melted; then a vapour rose from it, which gave origin to the sky; thereupon the earth was created from the remainder of the

jawharah.”<sup>92</sup> The “green leaf” in the mouth of the mythical animal that dwells at the rock signifies the source of life, immortality, and divine knowledge. In his Tafsir, Ibn Kathir says that “in the center of this rock there is a spring called “Life” (hayat) whose water renders alive whatever it reaches.”<sup>93</sup> The rock is also associated with the legendary Quranic figure al-Khidr, unto whom God says: “We had given mercy from us, and had taught him knowledge from our presence” (18:66). Al-Khidr, whose name connotes the idea of “green,” is he “who attained the source of life, has drunk of the water of immortality, and consequently knows neither old age nor death. He is the ‘Eternal Youth.’”<sup>94</sup>

These metaphorical expressions show the significance of centrality in the cosmological scheme. Axiality is equally significant. A tradition says that God has a pillar of light (amud al-nur), whose base is below the seventh earth and whose top is below the Throne. The pillar vibrates whenever one testifies to God’s unity.<sup>95</sup> This pillar of light connects heaven and earth, acting as a channel of communication that is exteriorized through the pillar’s vibration. This pillar echoes the concept of Muhammad as a column of light, already discussed. Penetrating the seven layers of the earth and the seven vaults of heaven, this pillar acts as axis mundi, around which existence revolves. It is a direct spatial expression of the axiality of the human presence. When Adam was brought down from paradise, a tradition tells, he was so tall that his head was in heaven, and his feet were on the earth. He could even hear the angels glorifying God.<sup>96</sup> In his diagram of the corporeal world, Ibn Arabi depicts the form of the Universal Man by the form of the axis mundi—al-amad that “you cannot see” (13:2)—without which the vault of heaven would collapse.<sup>97</sup>

Al-insan al-kamil, the cosmic pillar, is also referred to as “al-qutb,” the pole around which the world revolves. The Arabic term qutb derives from the

trilateral root q.t.b., “to bring together.” As the epitome of all manifested realities, Universal Man brings together in his being all possibilities and all modes of existence. He expands both horizontally and vertically: his horizontal expansion is his realization of all cosmic realities, while his vertical expansion is his realization of divine realities. His horizontal expansion is fourfold in that it comprises the realities of the four kingdoms—the mineral, plant, animal, and human—each of which represents certain modes of existence and actualizes a particular ensemble of possibilities. His vertical expansion traces a return passage from quadrature to unity. The idea of Universal Man recapitulates both cosmic and divine realities, and the notion of axially ensures continuous communication between the higher and the lower worlds and harmony between Man’s parental domains: his celestial fathers and terrestrial mothers.<sup>98</sup>

The term qutb is the name for the central piece around which a millstone rotates. Acting as a motionless hub for the rotating upper part, the qutb is firmly fixed in the still lower part of the millstone, hence the imagery of axis mundi. This is taken to represent the firm earthly rootedness of Universal Man, while his verticality acts as the unchanging pole around which the wheel of change revolves. “A millstone rotates only about its pole (qutb) when this pole is in the millstone,” Ibn Arabi writes, “for the pole is its firm essence, which is not susceptible of movement nor transposition during the state of rotation.”<sup>99</sup>

The revolution of the stars and heavenly bodies in the corporeal domain is also seen as following the metaphysical order of things in many and different ways. The spatial journey of the sun around the stationary earth, for example, engenders space and time, revealing the intertwined relationship between triplicity and quadrature. The annual journey of the sun is punctuated by four nodal points—two solstices and two equinoxes—dividing the

ecliptic into four qualitatively distinct intervals and marking out the cardinal directions of space. The cyclical rotation of the moon around the earth, which regulates time in the Islamic calendar, also has quadrature as its basic pattern. The twenty-eight phases of the lunar cycle involve four recurrent intervals, each with seven phases (4 7). No moon (al-mahaq) and full moon (albadr) mark the beginning and the middle of the cycle, the two extremes analogous to the solstices, whereas the half moons (al-tarbi ) mark two intermediate points similar to the equinoxes. The seven phases of every interval, which determine the week, are in themselves generated numerically by three and four (347), unfolding yet another cosmic modality of the primordial bond between triplicity and quadrature.

Within the domain of heaven and earth the metaphysical order of things is revealed in many forms. Centrality is revealed in the rock, the sacrum (ajb al-dhanab) of the world's body, and the primordial mountain. Circularity is revealed in the form of heavenly bodies and their orbits; in the domical form of the skies; in the form of nun, the fish; and in mount Qaf that encompasses the earth. The pattern of proliferation into a multitude of secondary centers is revealed in the ubiquitous presence of mount Qaf, symbolized by the links it has to all mountains and every place on earth. "There is no one country amongst all countries, nor a city amongst all cities, nor a town amongst all towns but has a root of its roots," a tradition affirms. Another adds, "nor is there any mountain of all mountains but has a root in Qaf."<sup>100</sup> Axiality is revealed in the pillar of light, in the primordial mountain, and in Universal Man, the cosmic pillar. Quadrature is revealed in the four angels standing on the rock, the four kingdoms, the four nodal points of the sun, the four directions of space, and the four intervals of the moon. Triplicity and quadrature are also embodied in the

corporeal conditions of space and time.

Fig. 3.10 The four nodal points of the moon's monthly cycle according to al-Amili ("Tashrih," MS. 3103).

### Space and Time

Perhaps nowhere the presence of the metaphysical order of triplicity and quadrature is more immediate and tangible to us than in our existential conditions of space and time. The three dimensions of space—length, breadth, and depth—spatialize triplicity, whereas the four divisions of time—day, week, month, and year—temporalize quadrature. Immanent yet elusive, tangible yet hard to define, space and time have their roots deep in the infinity and eternity of divinity. Throughout history and across all traditions, the human mind has marveled at the nature of these bounding conditions while constantly searching for ways to understand them. Today, science has taken the lead, but in premodern times it was the religio-philosophical imagination that provided the answers.

Following Judaism and Christianity, Islam reaffirmed the narrative of the creation: "Your lord is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days" (7:54). The six days of the creation presents a complex paradox and raises some interesting questions. If the existence of space and time is evidently tied to the existence of heaven and earth and the movement of the heavenly bodies, how could heaven and earth be created in six days? If the "day" mentioned in this verse refers to the temporal duration that we experience between two successive risings of the sun, no days should have existed before the existence of the stars and planets, and the six days of the creation remain inexplicable in terms of our time. This has often been resolved either by maintaining that the six days of the creation are presumed durations or by differentiating between two spatio-temporal modalities: divine and human. In Islamic cosmology, this was achieved

by distinguishing the spatio-temporal modality of the Throne and Footstool from that of heaven and earth. Through his intricate structure and a double movement scheme, Ibn Arabi was able to maintain that space and time already existed before the creation of heaven and earth, and that a day as a measuring unit was also differentiated in time by reference to the position of the divine Feet on the Footstool. This is a divine day, of course, as in “a day with God is as a thousand years of what you reckon” (22:47). Unlike our time, however, the divine time has neither daytimes (nahar), nor nighttimes (layl), nor weeks, nor months, nor years, nor seasons, for all of these relate to the sun and the moon.<sup>101</sup> There is, instead, pure duration of only one ever-recurring day.

As already discussed, the manifestation of space and time in their pure form first occurred in the Universal Matter, which was specially conditioned for this purpose. Their presence in the world of creation coincided with the production of the Absolute Body (al-jism al-kull), whose existence was mediated by three cosmic agents: the Intellect, the Soul, and the vacuum (alkhala ). God first brought Universal Matter into existence, Ibn Arabi says, within which he then unfolded the form of the three dimensions. The length, he says, was from the Intellect, the breadth from the Soul, and the depth was the vacuum, extending from the outermost perimeter to the innermost center.<sup>102</sup> God made the Universal Body circular in form, Ibn Arabi adds, filling up with it the entire vacuum—the imaginary extension without a body—and leaving outside it neither vacuum nor plenum.<sup>103</sup> In this sense, the Universal Body stands for the first spatialization of both the divine and the human presences and the materialization of the geometry of being.

Nature rules over the Universal Body, conditioning its possibilities, Ibn Arabi explains, while being the principal generator of time. In our spatio-temporal

modality, nature first unfolded the annual measure, the year, and differentiated the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—whose quadrature was then reflected in the four divisions of time—year, month, week, and day. The quadrature of the seasons was manifested by the sun traversing the signs of the constellations, which were also divided by nature into Igneous, Aerial, Aqueous, and Terrestrial, according to the division of the arkan into fire, air, water, and earth, which in turn reflected the divine creative quadrature.

104 Movement (haraka) was the main principle of generation brought about by the concurrence of space and time. Thought of as a form imposed on the Body by the Universal Soul, motion directly linked space and time to the generation of life.<sup>105</sup> “Time is associated with the motion of the Body,” the Ikhwan explain, “and the Body is passively generated by the Soul. As the Soul made the Universal Body spherical in shape, which is the noblest of all shapes, it also made its motion circular, which is the noblest of all motions.”<sup>106</sup>

Ibn Arabi reflects on the reasons behind the original motion and its circular form. The initial movement, he says, was caused by disequilibrium in the contrasting natural forces (heat-cold, moistness-dryness). In their original state of equilibrium nothing occurs: there can be neither bringing-into-existence nor production. The equilibrium was broken when heat dominated other forces, and as the amount of heat in the body of the sphere increased, the sphere moved. But there was nowhere to move to, for it had already filled up the entire vacuum. Under the force of disequilibrium, it moved in its place about its center, a movement of the middle.<sup>107</sup> This is best represented by the motion of a millstone: while every part is moving from one place to another by the movement of the whole, the whole itself does not change its location by the movement of the parts. This is the case with every circular motion, Ibn Arabi says, “it is

moving–still.” With regard to the whole, it does not evacuate its space by translocation, yet its parts remain in motion.<sup>108</sup>

The Universal Body is an imaginary entity, a necessary conceptual foundation for all three-dimensional bodies in the world of creation. Its first materialization is the Throne. As mentioned earlier, some astronomers identify the Throne with the atlas sphere or the sphere of the constellations, the motion of which then becomes the first generator of time. Ibn Arabi, however, places the atlas within the Throne in order to differentiate three modalities of time: divine, paradisaical, and human. As the cosmic progenitor of space and time, the atlas sphere plays a mediatory role, whose motion can be determined both from within and from without. Being without stars, the motion of the atlas engenders a pure, undifferentiated duration. On its own it lacks any distinguishable reference point that may differentiate its incessant movement into recurrent cycles.

Viewed from within, with reference to the sphere with fixed stars and the movement of planets and the stars, its pure motion becomes differentiated into the human temporal durations (day, week, month, year). Seen from within but without reference to the sphere with fixed stars and planetary skies, we have one pure paradisaical duration. Seen from without, however, with references to the position of the divine Feet on the Footstool we have the divine durations, to which God refers in the six days of the creation.<sup>109</sup>

Fig. 3.11 Differentiating the motion of the atlas sphere by reference to divine Feet according to Ibn Arabi.

As is the order of being, the divine modality of time forms the model for the human temporality. In articulating the relationship between the divine and human temporality, Ibn Arabi first distinguishes the movements of the stars from the motion of the atlas sphere itself. The revolution of the stars within the

atlas sphere, he posits, is subject to two types of movements: natural (tabiiyya) and forcible (qasriyya).<sup>110</sup> The natural movement is that whereby the stars traverse the atlas sphere from west to east, as seen by the eye, whereas the forcible movement is the reverse one whereby the stars move with the movement of the atlas sphere from east to west.<sup>111</sup> The situation is like an ant on a piece of material that is being pulled westward while the ant is moving eastward: the ant is simultaneously moving to the east and to the west. This is the situation of the stars, he says: at the same instant in which they are naturally moving from west to east, they are also forcibly moving from east to west. Humans work with the natural motion, while God works with the forcible. By means of the position of his Feet on the Footstool, God differentiates the primordial motion of the atlas sphere into seven recurrent cycles, or days, in accordance with the seven principal attributes of the divine presence. Ibn Arabi explains:

By the existence of the atlas sphere there occurred the seven days, the months, and the years. But these times were not determined until after God created inside this sphere the signs whereby these times were distinguished. The only duration this sphere determines is the day, which is one cycle determined by the position of the Foot on the Footstool. So it is determined from above, and the measure of one complete cycle is called “day” (yawm). Because of the homogeneity of this sphere, this day is known only to God most high. The starting point of its movement coincides with the first degree of Gemini, which is among the Aerial signs, facing the Foot. The first day manifested in the world was in the first degree of Gemini, and that day was called “al-Ahad” (Sunday) . . . Upon the end of the first cycle the sphere started another movement . . . This second movement was called “al-Ithnayn” (Monday), and so on until the seven cyclical movements were completed, one divine attribute determining

each movement. As the [principal] attributes are no more than seven, the days of the aeon (al-dahr) cannot be more than seven, not even by a day, for there is nothing that may necessitate it. Thus, the ruling returned to the first attribute that rotated the sphere [again] and the name Ahad became associated with it . . . [For the new cycle,] however, it was more appropriate to be the eighth with regard to the cycles, but since its existence was caused by the same first attribute its name did not change. Similarly, the cycle that followed, and so was the following one until the seven cycles [were once again completed].<sup>112</sup>

Accordingly, each divine attribute is seen to engender one entire cycle or day, during which period this attribute dominates over other attributes, causing its characteristic to inhere in all creatures. During the cycle which is engendered and dominated by the divine attribute of Hearing, for example, all creatures receive the characteristic of hearing by virtue of which they become able to hear.

The same goes for the rest of the principal attributes. Since the creative process begins with the utterance of the primordial word, hearing was the first characteristic the creatures received so that they became able to respond to the divine creative command “Be!” According to Ibn Arabi, the creative process took place in the following order:

Hearing Sunday al-Ahad

Living Monday al-Ithnayn

Seeing Tuesday al-Thulatha

Will Wednesday al-Arbia

Power Thursday al-Khamis

Knowledge Friday al-Jumua

Speech Saturday al-Sabt<sup>113</sup>

Representing the governing principles of universal manifestation, the seven

divine attributes at once determine the cyclical revolution of the atlas sphere and necessitate the creation of seven planets. This ensured the harmony and continuity between the divine and human modalities of time. In an interesting treatise on time and eternity, al-Qashani says that the seven principal divine names required intermediaries to ensure the continuity of their domination over all things in the corporeal world. So these names caused the existence of the seven revolving planets together with their spheres and made them the presidents and chieftains for directing the affairs of the present world. Thus the seven planets embody the dominating power of the seven divine names, representing the cosmic intermediaries between the immutable world of archetypes and the earthly creatures. The movements of the seven planets differentiate the pure temporal duration of the first motion into recurrent cycles of measured duration in accordance with the divine model. Al-Qashani explains:

If you consider the first motion and the extension of its duration, which is undifferentiated time (*al-zaman al-mutlaq*), disregarding what is below it, it has neither beginning nor end nor division. But if you relate the sun to a particular point, any point whatsoever, the year, whose every cycle is the return of the sun to that point, begins by the movement of the sun whereby it traverses the parts of the sphere of the constellations. By this movement the [pure] duration is articulated into years; the year, in regard to the sun's traversing of the constellations, into months; the months into weeks; the weeks, in regard to the sun's return to the first point in its diurnal movement, into days; the days into hours; the hours into minutes; the minutes into seconds; then into thirds until now, which is to time as the geometrical point is to a line.<sup>114</sup>

The movements of the seven planets also qualify the pure extension of space. The diurnal and annual journeys of the sun, while differentiating time, simultaneously

qualify space by measuring out its extremities and marking out the cardinal directions—east, west, south, north, zenith, and nadir. Through the combined rhythm of their revolutions, the seven planets construct various geometric relationships based on their reciprocal positions against the twelve signs of the zodiac, unfolding as it were the spatial cosmic qualities that are virtually contained in the pure, unqualified space of the atlas sphere. In Ibn Arabi's cosmological scheme, the atlas sphere with the rock as its center, imagined independently of the planetary skies, gives the image of an all-encompassing sphere that represents space as an undifferentiated totality. Thus imagined, the atlas provides the cosmic model for the geometric sphere, the spatial expression par excellence of the divine presence. Its empty vastness signifies the divine's all possibility and immutability, while the inexhaustible multitude of its directions signifies the multiplicity of the divine names and attributes.<sup>115</sup> As the inexhaustible multitude of the names is exemplified by seven only, six of which are related to the created world and one, the Living, acting as their principle, so likewise the multiplicity of the directions in space, determined by the lines connecting the point of the center and the points of the sphere's surface, are exemplified by seven only, six of which are on the sphere's surface, determining the six main directions—front and back, left and right, and up and down—and the seventh point, acting as their common principle, the directionless source. The primordial motion of the atlas sphere generates a pure duration of time that is, as is the pure extension of space, indefinite, unqualified, and undifferentiated. This mode of time mirrors divine eternity, as time is to us what eternity is to God.<sup>116</sup> Al-Qashani even compares the undetermined temporal duration generated by the primordial motion to the inconceivable duration (imtidad) of the subsistence of the divine Essence. As the undetermined Essence becomes determined when the seven principal names are related to it, so likewise the undifferentiated motion of the atlas sphere becomes differentiated when the movements

of the seven planets are contrasted with its motion.

Fig. 3.12 The multilayered world according to Ibn Arabi (Futuhāt).

In that cosmic manifestation coincides with the utterance of the primordial word, the differentiation of the pure spatio-temporal modality of the atlas sphere corresponds to the articulation of the primordial sound, the medium through which the primordial word was externalized. The Sufis correlate the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, which represent as many articulations of an unobstructed breath emanating from the heart, with the twenty-eight mansions of the moon. The articulated sounds of the letters are “the microcosmic and human expression of the essential determinations of the divine Breath, which is itself the prime motivation of the cosmic cycles.” Ibn Arabi says that contrary to what people think that “the mansions of the moon represent the models of the letters; it is the twenty-eight sounds which determine the lunar mansions.” The twenty-eight mansions of the moon also correspond to twenty-eight divine names. The process of the sonorous differentiation proceeds in a successive order from the letter *alif* (A) to the letter *waw* (W). As the *alif* does not admit any of the vocalizing motions (*harakat*), it is unpronounceable. It is therefore represented by the *hamza* (hiatus), which “is not properly speaking a sound, but only a transitory instance between silence and locution.”

The *hamza*, the threshold between the silence of nonexistence and the sound of existence, corresponds to the Universal Intellect and coincides with the spring equinox. The *hamza* represents the unpronounceable *alif*, which is to the letters what the one is to the numbers. In the same way that one is not a number but the principle of numbers, the *alif* is not a sound but the principle of sounds. The first articulated sound is *ha* (H). Proceeding from the innermost source, the heart, *ha* is the least differentiated and articulated consonant; it is

the audible reflection of the inaudible *ali f*. The articulation of sounds proceeds from *ha*, passing through the guttural, palatal, and dental consonants, to the last and outermost labial consonant *waw*. The first and the last consonants in this process form the Arabic word *huwa*, “he,” which sums up the whole order of being: “He is the first and the last, and the outward and the inward; and he is knower of all things” (57:3).